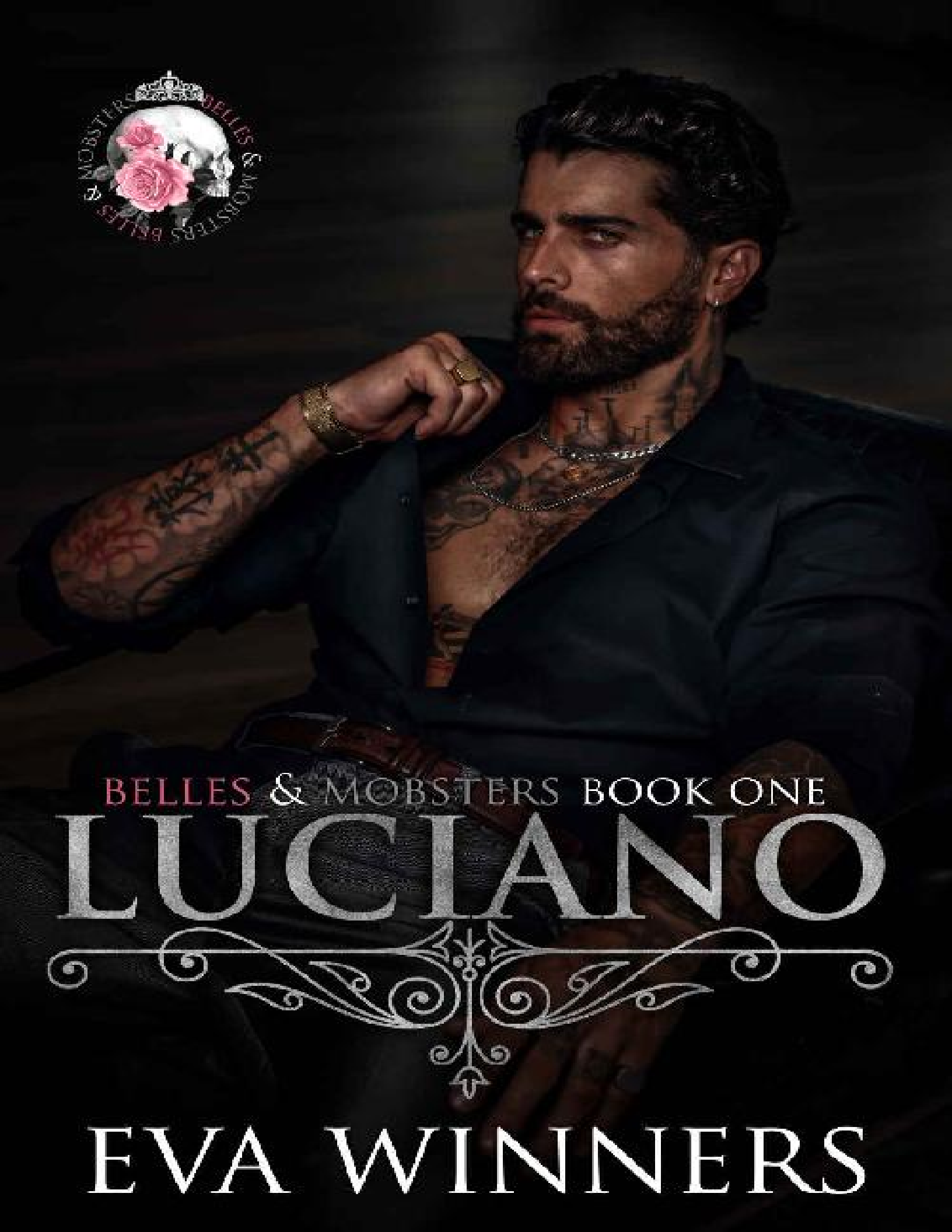
BELLES & MOBSTERS BOOK ONE
LUCIANO
EVA WINNERS

LUCIANO

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

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EVA WINNERS

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LUCIANO

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

Each book in Belles & Mobster series can be read as a standalone.

If you'd like a preview to the Belles and Mobsters, Book Two make sure to keep reading and check out the prologue to Nico after the ending of Luciano.

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To my daughters, love you always and forever.

To my Happy Hour Ladies – you feed so many ideas.

To all my family and friends – thank you!

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PLAYLIST

IF YOU'D LIKE to hear a soundtrack with songs that are featured in this book, as well as songs that inspired me, here's the link:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/41t3vi3hcGYvGQNig1Rtm1?si=Vw6lcExwT_6RBkANqHlpvQ&dl_branch=1

In no particular order…

"Silence" - Marshmello (feat. Khalid)
"Tears of Gold" - Faouzia
"Like a Ghost" - Hahlweg
"Listen To Your Heart" - Roxette
"Young and Beautiful" - Lana Del Rey
"Nothing Breaks Like a Heart" - Moss Kena
"Lips Don't Lie" - Ally Brooke
"Bitter" - Fletcher
"Girls, girls, girls" - Fletcher
"The Best You Had" - Nina Nesbitt
"Feel It" - Michele Morrone
"Play with Fire" - Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money
"Someone Else" - Miley Cyrus
"So Sick" - Kiiara
"Bad Look" - Charming Horses
"Bad Habits" - Ed Sheeran

“Run” - OneRepublic
“Good 4 U” - Olivia Rodrigo

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PROLOGUE

"My wife." As he whispered those words into my ear, his warm breath seared my sensitive skin. He pumped into me with slow, powerful thrusts. My nails dug into his muscles, the grip tight and every sensation within me burning with need. His voice was cocky and possessive.

"Say you are mine," he demanded.

Just like the night we met, his gaze sent a blaze through my body and heat brushed through every inch of my skin. His gaze on me was like a hot and cold brush over my skin.

"Yours," I vowed.

The moment our eyes met in his club three months ago, the air rushed out of my lungs and my life has been spinning in all the right directions. My body jolted with a strange electric sensation when his hazel green gaze watched me, the cockiness and arrogance written all over his face. But I still couldn't resist the pull. I have been his from the moment we locked eyes across the room in that nightclub.

Right now, I ached for him, needing more of him. His everything. I had never thought I could belong to someone so completely. But I was his, every piece of my heart, soul, and body. I was all his.

His groans vibrated against my ear and through every little piece of me. From the tip of my toes to the strands of my hair.

"Please, Luciano," I begged breathlessly.

He knew what that meant. He read me like an open book. He sped up his rhythm, his sculpted, inked body thrusting hard, in and out, filling me up again and again. Each time, touching places deep inside of me. My nails raked his shoulders, my cries for him getting louder with each thrust. He rutted me hard and relentlessly, deeper and rougher. Exactly the way I needed him.

My hips rolled beneath him, meeting his every thrust. He made my body burn, the flames of desire licking each inch of my skin. I didn't care about anyone or anything. Just him. He'd ruined me for anyone else. My heart was his. I was a fool to think I'd ever escape untouched by him, in one way or another. He had taken my heart and my body, like a thief in the night.

"Fuck. I can't get enough of you," he grunted, thrusting hard, pounding me like the ruthless beast he was. And I loved every second of it. Relished the feeling of him losing control inside me. His fingers dug into my hips, holding me in the manner that would enhance both of our pleasures the best. He knew my body better than I did.

An intense orgasm burst through me, a scream leaving my lips, and my entire body went taut. My nails dug into his back as my pussy spasmed around his shaft. He thrust again; once, twice, before he followed me right over the cliff.

A TRAILER BLOCKED MY VIEW OF THE EAST RIVER. FROWNING, I HOPED THE driver would speed up and pass us by so I could get a glimpse of the view. This was my favorite part of going into the city, going over the Brooklyn Bridge and the views stretching across the river. I kept watching and waiting, but the tractor trailer maintained its speed, parallel with our driver, and I missed it. It was snowing lightly and temperatures were cold, so cold that I heard on the news that the river froze. But because of this driver, I missed it.

On my way back, I hoped silently. I'd catch it on our way back if it wasn't too dark.

I glanced over at Luciano to find him watching me. *My husband*. It still seemed surreal to find myself married. And to this man.

Images of what we had done before we showered to get ready for our date played in my mind, making my cheeks hot. I was sure the blush was permanently stained there with things we've done since we got married. He always managed to make me blush. Like a permanent side effect every time he looked at me, touched me, or spoke to me.

Has it only been three months? It felt longer. I never expected to fall for him but here we were. I have fallen in love with my husband. It had been a rough start, an unexpected start, but somehow it had all worked out.

"You are staring at me," I scolded him on a soft chuckle.

"You love it when I watch you."

I bit on my lower lip, to hide my smile. He was right. Regularly, I hated being the center of attention, but when he watched me, it was different. I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world, and everyone faded out as he stared at me with eyes the color of cool moss in early fall, right after the rain. I loved his eyes. There could be a harshness, a ruthlessness, in them but also such incredible passion. Hopefully, I'd see love glimmer in his hazel gaze one day as well because I knew without a doubt I was falling for my husband, despite our rocky start.

It was his eyes that captured me from the very first moment. The moment our gazes locked across the club, the night of my graduation, he had turned my world upside down. In a good way, despite the fact I didn't think so at first. The way those hazel eyes watched me, hungrily, made my insides shudder in delight. God, I hoped one day our kids would have his eyes.

My husband was handsome, his face fit for *GQ* magazine, not a mobster world. Except when he was furious, ready to make his enemies suffer. Then his mobster side came right out. My family was on his revenge list, not that I could blame him. Although I didn't know what exactly they had done to him, I knew firsthand how cruel, heartless, and evil my grandmother and uncle could be. My uncle, Alphonso Romano, ruined numerous lives, costing many men their precious daughters and their wives.

He almost ruined my life until I found haven in the unlikeliest of people… this ruthless mobster, covered in ink.

Luciano pulled me closer to him and all thoughts of my family evaporated. Bending his head, he showered kisses against my neck, whispering the naughty things we would do the moment we got back home. Shivers of delight ran through my spine and desire pooled between my

thighs. My body burned with an inferno only he knew how to set off. He knew it would be on my mind throughout dinner. We hadn't even gotten to the restaurant, and I was ready to go back home.

We were on our way to Maurizio's. It has become our default restaurant date. There was nervous energy pumping through my veins. Everything between us had happened so fast, and truthfully, our whole marriage started as leverage against my family. I had been his willing victim, seeing a way out for me and my best friend. Yes, he forced me down the aisle, but I wasn't blind to the benefits in taking that walk. Protection from my uncle and grandmother.

And somehow, we ended up here. We never talked about the future or our plans. Hopefully, he would be happy about our future together as much as I was.

Luciano swept me up from his night club and straight down the altar. It sounded so much better than labeling it as a kidnapping. Three months ago, I would have preached caution to any girlfriend that acted like this. I would have called it Stockholm Syndrome and the start of a very unhealthy relationship. But now, I could understand falling head over heels for someone. Besides, unintentionally and unbeknownst to him, he saved me. If he hadn't taken me when he did, the fate my uncle had prepared for me was horrid. And now, I could help my best friend Gabriella too. Things were finally looking up.

The driver pulled up in the back of the restaurant, which was reserved only for the restaurant owner and Luciano's team. After the car was parked, Luciano stepped out and held his inked hand to help me out. I took it with a smile.

"You look beautiful," he murmured, his eyes mesmerizing me.

"You don't look too shabby yourself." Truth was, he looked so handsome. Women always gawked after him, and today, I was sure it would be no different. But it wasn't his good looks that captivated me. It was his over-the-top possessive and protective personality. Since my parents died, I had not had that. My best friend and I pretty much had to look out for each other. Nobody else cared what happened to us, and if my uncle's plan had succeeded, both she and I would have been sold.

The back door of the restaurant flew open, and Maurizio's son Mauro stormed out frantically. His disheveled hair was the first thing I noticed.

Roberto’s and Massimo’s furious expressions were the next. They were right behind him.

“We were hit.”

The words slashed the cold January air, but it didn’t compare to the way my blood froze as I watched Luciano spin around and push me up against the car. Before I could even process what happened, Roberto and Massimo had their guns aimed at my head.

“You betrayed me,” Luciano spat at me, the affection dissipating from his hazel eyes, and now all I saw in them was hate.

“W-what?” My heart thundered, every fiber in my body was drenched in fear. His burning gaze turned into one of frigid fury, matching the cold, grey day around us and flurries coming down.

Cold fear gripped me. How did he go from his hot, hungry gaze to this cold rage? I struggled to process it all. Luciano’s hard, towering body locked me against the car, the freezing metal of the barrel of his own gun pressed hard against my temple.

“You betrayed me!” he shouted.

“I-I didn’t.” My voice shook, my words fumbling in a stutter.

“You are the only one who knew besides my men. I fucking trusted you.”

My vision blurred, my breathing heavy. I stared at him, praying he’d see the truth in my eyes.

“Please, Luciano!” I whispered as a snowflake landed on my eyelash. It felt heavy, my face frozen from the cold and terror. “I didn’t betray you.” I breathed in, my lungs hurting from the frigid cold air.

“I’ve had shipments coming here for weeks. We were never hit. The week I tell you, we are hit.”

“Luciano, please listen,” I begged in a small voice. “I didn’t betray you. I love you!”

He laughed, his face twisted in disgust at my words. At me. At my declaration of love. It was the first time I spoke those words to my husband.

The barrel of his gun pressed harder against my temple and my whole body shook. From fear. From the cold. And the look of disgust in his eyes.

“Let’s play a little game,” he growled, a menacing smile on his face. Slowly he pulled the gun from my temple while Roberto and Massimo held their aim on me. He opened the cylinder of the revolver, eyeing it, counting the number of bullets before spinning the cylinder and flicking it closed.

“Russian roulette. Shall we?” He pressed the barrel of the revolver back to my temple.

The whole scene played out like it was happening to someone else; like it was a bad movie.

“Should I kill you now?” he bellowed, rage clear on his face. “I should have expected something like that from someone of your caliber. After all, the Romano family excels at backstabbing.”

I stared at him in confusion and hurt. How could he think that of me? Less than an hour ago, he was inside me and made love to me.

“Luciano-” Massimo cut in.

“Shut the fuck up!” he roared at him. His gaze never wavered from me and those words almost felt aimed at me. “Any last words, wife?”

I watched those eyes that I loved so much, my heart shredding into tiny pieces. It felt like shards of glass tearing at my skin, except the pain tore through me, inside me, leaving invisible scars in its wake. A tear rolled down my face, its trail turning to frost almost immediately. Just as I felt my heart freeze with each of Luciano’s harsh words. I was too scared to move, to wipe it clean.

Despite my shattering heart, and suddenly bleak future, I felt anger rise within me. It was better that way, it kept my walls up that I should have never lowered for him. I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself; he wasn’t worth my love. He wasn’t worthy of me. But the words got stuck in my throat.

Then he pulled a trigger.

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Chapter One

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LUCIANO

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Three Years Later

I was the Ruthless King in the financial business world and in the criminal underworld. That's what everyone called me.

Ruthless King. Unforgiving king.

Just ask my fucking wife who has been missing for the past three years and six months. The memory of the betrayal still tasted bitter. But one good thing came out of it; my heart was as hard as the Arctic ice.

It had been three years and six months since the full-blown war erupted between the Vitale and the Romano family. The war between our two families started when the Romano family killed my mother and sister. Attacks, lives lost, fortunes burned... But it was that last betrayal that drove me insane. She chose them over me. She sold me out. And I never go soft on my enemies. I had stripped down the trust funds and empires of my enemies in this war. Some even lost their lives.

I won, and the people who were on my side flourished and became wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. My empire grew tenfold. People who were not on my side… let's just say they lost much. The Romano family lost most of their fortune, but just like rats they kept coming back. Their financial suffering wasn't enough. I wanted them all dead. I had successfully pushed the Romanos out of every business except for one, human trafficking. But that one would happen soon too! When I set my mind to shit, I didn't stop till it happened.

Tonight, I was hosting the biggest event of the year at my casino. I owned every casino in New Jersey, except for one. That one belonged to my best friend, Cassio King.

There will be members of the mafia here - Irish, Italians, Russians, Colombians - as well as politicians, dirty and clean, drug and gun dealers, human traffickers, the rich and famous of this world. I didn’t discriminate. I took all their money, and they all owed me. They all needed me. I had runners all over the world who cleaned money for me. I ran it all, but none of it could be easily pinned on me or traced by anyone. Money laundering was my main source of fortune, but I also owned casinos, nightclubs, and ran drugs occasionally. Though the latter was not something I did often. Drugs and guns were mainly Cassio’s line of work. And the rest of the guys.

I sat my cognac on the side table, watching through the one-way glass as politicians, criminals, and the rich equally squirmed. I hated all those fuckers. I hated the criminals that pretended they were better even more. Like the fucking Romanos.

We were all killers and sinners. One big difference - my friends and I only killed when we needed to. Or for revenge. Many of these men killed for power, money, sport, or even pleasure.

And some even use their own family to try and get ahead. The way Alphonso Romano used his niece's charms and beauty to blind me, and I played right into it.

My blood boiled in fury, tempting me to just go into full attack mode. Consequences be damned. I wanted the man dead, but only after I tortured him, nice and slow. I wanted to hear him cry, squeal like a pig, beg. But he still wouldn’t get any mercy from me.

“You good?” Cassio’s voice pulled me back from the edge. No, I wasn’t fucking good, but I kept the words locked in.

Cassio King was my best friend; he had been since we were kids. My allegiances were always with him. And his with me. His territory was New York, alongside the Italian and Irish mafia there. I wouldn’t be surprised to see him in bed with the Irish soon. Jack Callahan was a ruthless but fair motherfucker. He’d be a good ally. Cassio and Luca kept an eye on Margaret and Ainé, Callahan’s niece and step-daughter. It would be interesting to see how that enfolded.

My territory was New Jersey and Connecticut. We have had a working relationship for years. It certainly helped when both of us had to divert shipments. He used my ports, and I used his.

“I am ready to get this show rolling,” I gritted through my teeth.

Seeing my wife's uncle made me want to rage, destroy. It was a reminder of what I lost, because of that man. He cost my mother and sister their lives. And then he used my wife like a disposable toy to get one over on me. She fucking knew it and played willingly. It pissed me off that she didn't tell me. It infuriated me even more that I fell for it. That was what happened to men like me when we became blinded by pussy.

There were whispers he had her killed after I dropped her off at his doorstep. I didn't think so. Those two probably conspired against me about everything. It was probably their whole plan from the moment I spotted her in my nightclub. I wanted her to watch the Romano downfall and know who caused it. So she could grovel and regret her decision of betrayal.

My father was the only person that firmly believed she was alive, and that she was innocent. I fucking hated that I hoped she was alive, but I thirsted for revenge even more. Once I got her, I'd make her pay. But first, I'd fuck her out of my system once and for all.

Cassio backed me up when the war started, helped me make them all pay. He knew what happened with my wife and he still had my back. Like always, Cassio stood by me.

I hit the Romano family where it hurt the most, their money. They had lost it all, or at least I thought they had. But it wasn't enough for me. I was after their blood. It helped that both Cassio and his brother Luca were against human trafficking. They fought it too, just like my family did. Unfortunately for us, Alphonso fucking Romano was big into that shit. And I would never clean money for men who traffic women and children.

But I had a plan. One that would bring him down once and for all. Him and all the ones that worked with him.

Luca made his way to us along with Alessandro Russo and Nico Morrelli. I knew I could count on these guys. Alessandro Russo ran his shit in Canada, his headquarters in Montréal. His main illegitimate business focused on guns, as well as owning a few casinos. Nico Morrelli ran D.C. and Maryland. He mainly ran casinos and smuggled drugs with a real-estate business as a front. Cassio did a bit of it all and depended on me to clean his money. It was one business he didn't touch which was fine by me. I had plenty of runners to launder all my activities, his and thousands of others. Luca wasn't just Cassio's brother but his right-hand man and helped us all when we needed it. These were some of the fiercest men, and I was lucky to have them at my back.

“I already heard that fucker talk about his sick business with the Colombians,” Nico spat out. “Raphael has a good poker face.”

“Perfect,” I muttered. I had set the trap with the help of the Colombians. Raphael Santos was my friend, too, and he recently came into ruling Florida after his father and eldest brother were killed. Lombardo Santos and his eldest son Vincent worked with the Romanos and with Cassio and Luca’s father Benito King in trafficking. Raphael was against trafficking women, so it worked out that Vasili Nikolaev’s brother, Sasha, killed Raphael’s eldest brother and father. Clean sniper shot to the brain. He was definitely my kind of man.

The Romano empire crumbled over the last three years while mine flourished, but that fucker still managed to build it back up. I have no idea how he came up with the capital. Nobody would finance him, knowing my stance on it. But he got his dirty paws on some capital and got his returns through flesh selling. I hated that man’s guts.

Cassio and I suspected it might be Benito, but that bastard was a stingy motherfucker and wasn’t into giving loans. More like he would have taken the shipments of women for himself.

“Vasili Nikolaev is here with his brother, Alexei,” Alessandro added. “Apparently, Vasili is not happy with Alphonso. He tried to arrange the kidnapping of Vasili’s woman, and Vasili is out for his blood. The fucker got himself another enemy.”

“Good,” I grinned. Vasili was bloodthirsty and ruthless. If I fail, he would certainly be right behind me waiting for his turn to strike. Both Alexei and Sasha, Vasili’s brothers, were some of the most sought-after killers in our world. Alphonso Romano would be dead, one way or the other.

“Let the games begin,” I told them all. I would play all my cards right and looked forward to seeing the Romano dynasty fall for the last time. Next time, there would be nobody and nothing to lift them up.

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Chapter Two

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GRACE

I stared at the computer screen, smiling. It wasn't the first time he had written me an email asking me to join his team. I assumed it was a man since all his transaction codes came from profiler Ruthless King.

To: The Ghost
From: Ruthless King

You should take me up on my offer. There are benefits to being on my payroll.

K

I chuckled as I typed my reply.

To: Ruthless King
From: The Ghost

No, thank you. I like being my own boss. I expect my fee to be transferred within 24 hours. Yes, I'm being generous giving you longer than anyone else.

P.S. I'm off to the beach. Don't even think about bothering me for the rest of the day.

P.P.S. See, the perks of being my own boss. :-)

I pressed the send button and smiled. It was sad that most of my social life consisted of talking to my two-year-old son, my best friend, and email correspondence with Ruthless King. That name should have caused me fear, but I found that after what Gabriella and I survived over the last four years, it didn't. He was a faceless, nameless man that needed extra help laundering money. And that was where Gabriella and I came in.

I stretched my back, careful not to knock the laptop off my lap, and enjoyed the view of the sea that spread for miles and miles in front of me. It took my breath away every single time. Life was finally good. We have found the perfect little island with the population of less than four thousand people to settle in. The island fell under the region of Sicily but still had its own authenticity. Sicily was too big for us; this was perfect.

I had the people that were most important to me in my life, my son and Gabriella. She has been my best friend since boarding school. She was the sister I never had. After we escaped, the nightmare still wasn't over for us. Taking the first flight out of the U.S., we lived on the run, constantly

looking over our shoulders. We misjudged how long the money would last us. Within three months, we were broke, hungry and without a roof over our heads.

But we survived it all, and we were stronger now. We had our little routine going and the past seemed irrelevant. As if it happened to someone else, not me. Not us!

The day was beautiful. Every day was beautiful here. We've seen a lot over the last few years traveling, but Favignana in Sicily easily became my top favorite town. I could understand now why my husband's father, Matteo Vitale, spoke about it so fondly. It truly was a little slice of heaven on this earth. Life was just different here - the slower-paced mentality and mild climate made it an appealing spot to settle in permanently. And ironically, it made me feel at home. Just like Matteo Vitale said it would.

We moved here nine months ago, after spending over two years constantly moving. This place lingered in the back of my mind from the moment we went on the run. Didn't experts always say that hiding something in plain sight was most efficient? Besides, in some weird way the area that used to be home to Matteo Vitale and his young wife felt like an invisible cloak of protection.

So we found ourselves here, and I could see myself staying here forever. Except that I sucked at Italian. Matteo, my son, on the other hand, was soaking it up.

"Ella, are you ready?" I called out to my best friend, sticking to her nickname. She and my son, Matteo, were packing up toys like we were moving to the beach, not just walking less than hundred yards to it.

"Yes, grabbing the sunscreen and putting on a bathing suit. Then I'm all ready."

"You are not even in a bathing suit?" I asked in a groan.

I went to shut my laptop down when my email pinged. Throwing a quick glance, I smiled. I knew he couldn't resist.

To: The Ghost

From: Ruthless King

I'd let you go to the beach. Once in a while. I'm a great boss like that.

K

I chuckled again. At least he was being honest.

To: Ruthless King
From: The Ghost

But I'm a better boss because I'd let myself go to the beach every day. You're not that great at selling yourself.

Nice doing business with you. Till our next transaction.

Clicking the send button, I waited for the email to leave my outbox and shut the laptop right after. I strode to the little play area where Matteo kept trying to throw another toy into the bag.

"Who's ready for the beach?" I asked excitedly.

His green eyes raised up to me and a big smile spread on his face. "Io. Io." *Me. Me.* Matteo was answering more in Italian than English. He raised his chubby hands to me to lift him up, and I laughed out loud.

"You are a little boss man, you know that?"

He grinned, little giggles escaping him as he twirled around.

Ella swept into the room with a wide smile. "Okay, I'm ready."

“Let’s go then.”

Our villa was small but the most charming place I had ever lived. I loved everything about our life here. People were friendly and kind, food was amazing, and it felt like the three of us belonged. I never wanted to leave.

It took us exactly five minutes to get to the beach, and that was with interruptions of running into familiar faces along the way and chatting.

“God, I love that the beaches are empty now,” I murmured as I laid out our beach towels. “Tourist season is finally over.”

It was the second week in September and all of Europe got back to their normal work lives and offices. Ella and I didn’t have normal work lives. Our biggest disadvantage when we came to Europe was our lack of language skills. Neither one of us could speak any other language besides English. Second disadvantage was that neither one of us had a useful skill. I studied music, she studied art. Third disadvantage was that I was pregnant.

So our choices were limited. But there were a few things I picked up during my marriage and while under my grandmother’s and uncle’s roof. My grandmother wanted me to be a perfect belle to a mobster one day. Just not to the mobster I ended up marrying. The ruthless Luciano Vitale.

After all, my grandmother and uncle told me on numerous occasions that all good mob wives should know three things - how to back her man, how to keep her mouth shut, and how to help the family when needed. Except nobody expected me to get a backbone and use those skills for myself. It helped Ella and me when needed. We refused to be used anymore. Both Ella and I had established new identities and changed our appearances just enough that if we ever ran into someone we knew, they wouldn’t recognize us.

Then we turned to not so legal business. Money laundering through several Bahama shell companies and Swiss accounts.

Ella dated a boy for a bit that was heavy into IT and firewalls. It turned out, she was really good at it. So we put it to good use.

She ensured our firewalls and messages were encrypted and untraceable. By the time anyone got any message from us, it went through at least ten IP addresses and locations. Our firewalls were thick. I, on the other hand, handled the transactions through shell companies in the Bahamas and Swiss accounts, along with all the customer correspondence.

I wasn’t exactly proud of it, but it kept us fed and off the streets. I shuddered remembering those first six months. We almost ended up living on the streets. Some nights when sleep wouldn’t come, I laid awake haunted by that gnawing hunger and fear. I was scared we’d never make it to our next birthday and my baby would die before even taking his first breath. We did what was necessary to survive.

Shoving the dark memories away, I focused on this beautiful day, my son, and my best friend. We were healthy, had a roof over our heads and food on our table. That was all that mattered. I would never again depend on anyone. Ella and I took only a limited number of transactions per month. We learned to be selective. We’d laundered for certain clients that didn’t deal in the type of businesses that we wouldn’t condone. Truthfully, they were all business we didn’t condone, but we tried to choose the lesser of the evils.

Any business that dealt in human trafficking, we stayed clear of. Same with any type of businesses that sold sexual services. It pretty much left us with drug and gun smugglers. Thanks to Ella’s IT skills, she was able to use the dark web to validate businesses our clients dealt in. In most cases, she was able to get the identities of our clients. Ruthless King was an exception however, we connected with a few other runners and his credentials seemed to hold true. He was against human trafficking and was known to turn away the business of laundering money for those like the Kings and the Romano family. Everything we checked on him panned out - he didn’t deal with any criminals that touched that type of business.

I connected with Ruthless King fifteen months ago and had dealt almost exclusively with him over the last six months. He kept it short, clean, and to the point. Plus, he paid the most commission, so it was good all the way around.

“We are living the life,” Ella agreed, turning over onto her stomach and promptly drifting off to sleep. That girl lived for sunbathing.

Yes, life is good now. Even if the business was to go away, we were financially set for several years before we’d run out of money. If we could keep this going for another three years, we could stop doing it and just live the rest of our lives doing little jobs here and there. We’d still be set, and Matteo would never go hungry.

“Matteo, come here so Mommy can put sunblock on you,” I called out to my son.

He abandoned his little sand digging and walked over with a big grin. His hazel eyes watched me with love and trust while his dark hair ruffled under the light breeze. God, how he reminded me of his father.

The familiar dull pain throbbed in my chest, but it was gone quickly. I had worked hard to forget the pain and loss of his father. My son was a reminder, but in a good way. I liked to think of my husband as he could have been if he wasn't corrupted by all the events in his life.

I squeezed the lotion into my hands and applied it over his exposed skin. Matteo had a year-round tan, just like his father. But I was paranoid and used lots of sunscreen. If I could, I'd put Matteo into a secure bubble, but I knew it would fail. My parents tried that with me, and it didn't work out. They only succeeded in making me weak. I wouldn't repeat that with my own son. Instead, I'd make him strong. He could be good and still take no shit from anyone. I wouldn't let my son grow up to be gullible or defenseless like I was.

"Okay, you are all set," I told him, placing a smooch on his cheek. He immediately giggled. "Want help building your sand hole?"

"Sì," he replied in Italian.

"Okay, my little Italian man. Let's go build."

He handed me his extra sand shovel and we both got to work. He babbled all along, half in English and half in Italian. Most of it, I couldn't understand. It didn't help that he babbled Italian in baby talk. I've been trying to learn Italian to keep up with Matteo, but I was failing miserably. Or Matteo learned at a much faster pace than me. Still, I didn't let any of it deter me.

"You know the waves are going to crash into our masterpiece in the next half hour." I followed his gaze to the sea, watching him frown. "But the good news is that we can come back tomorrow and do it all over again."

He grinned and my heart melted for my little guy.

"What should we do for dinner, huh?" I asked him.

"Pizza."

"Oh, I think that is a marvelous idea," I agreed. " Should we go to Zio Juno or Neptuno?"

"Juno, Mamma."

I smiled. I knew Juno would be his answer. They had a little girl Matteo's age that always came out to play with him each time we ate there.

"I agree. Okay, Juno it is. We'll tell Aunt Ella when she wakes up."

I glanced at Ella. She still laid in the exact same position. “Woman, you are going to burn like a crab,” I shouted to her laughing.

She stirred and got up. Her beach tan and blonde hair made her look gorgeous. Like a real beach babe. I wished I could tan as beautiful as her. I constantly applied sunscreen to prevent sunburn. My natural ginger red hair combined with my fair skin made it hard to get a decent tan. Although I colored my hair brown, it didn’t take away from my fair skin tone. When we first arrived in Italy, I was so envious of everyone’s tan. But I quickly got over it. It wasn’t as if I could do anything about it.

“I’m hungry,” she announced.

“Ah, yes. Matteo and I decided we would go to Zio Juno. It is pizza day. What do you think?”

She immediately grinned. “That’s a great idea.”

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Chapter Three

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LUCIANO

It wasn’t until early morning hours that I finally went to bed.

The trap was laid. Every table last night was strategically placed. There was a good reason why I sat Alphonso Romano next to the Columbians. He was a greedy bastard, and I knew he couldn’t resist jumping on a deal. It was exactly what I wanted him to do. Raphael would play along as if his father’s flesh moving business was still alive and offer a deal to Alphonso. The bastard would take him up on it and promise a shipment to Benito King along with an advance payment. He would end up empty-handed because Raphael would never deliver him women to sell. His sister, Isabella Nikolaev, would never speak to him if he ventured into it. And just like that - Alphonso Romano would be squirming like a little rat, knowing Benito King never gave second chances. But not to worry - I’d kill him before Benito because I would ensure his torture was long and detailed.

Money traded hands multiple times, and I made more than enough from all of them. It was what I was good at. It was the reason why the Vitale family has owned New Jersey and parts of the city for the last two centuries. We were good at making money. We owned every crime family that operated in the city, along with most of the buildings. Laundering money for crime families gave insights to their secrets. Not that I cared about them - as long as it didn’t fuck with my family and my friends.

I itched to speed things along, but I knew each wrong move on my chessboard could cost me. Alphonso had information I needed. I needed to know where his niece was, where my wife was. Once he was ensnared by the Columbians, and I had him exactly where I wanted him, I’d burn the

Romano family to the ground. As if they never existed. They'd be wiped off this planet.

I peeled off my three-piece suit and headed for my bathroom. Turning on the water, I stepped into the palatial shower in my master bath. I let the water wash the night away. I wished it would wash away this anger and frustration that brimmed inside me, ready to boil over.

Staring at the built-in shelf in my shower, my eyes locked on my wife's shampoo and conditioner that still sat there. Body wash too. I should have gotten rid of it. The fragrance still lingered in her bottles, all I had to do was open them.

I remembered her smell, that unique smell of violets. Every time we showered together, the smell lingered around me for hours despite my own body wash. I'd lather her hair, help her smooth out those red tangles. She was so responsive to every touch of mine. I could still remember each moan, each touch from her during our last shower together.

I closed my hand around my cock as I pictured my wife - her body writhing under me, her full mouth smiling dreamily as she prepared to take my cock between her lips. God, the first time she lowered herself onto her knees, I almost spilled before she even took my cock into her mouth. After weeks of foreplay and her refusing to ever get on her knees for any man, it was the most magnificent sight.

My queen wanted me as much as I wanted her. Her submission was fucking erotic. With one hand pressed against the stone wall of the shower, I gripped my cock tighter and stroked it as I pictured my wife, the mental image of our last time together in the shower.

"Luciano, what are you doing?" Grace rasped, a blush spreading through every inch of her pale skin. She blushed so easily and her light complexion with freckles refused to hide it. I fucking loved it.

I dropped to my knees in front of her, prepared to worship her. She was like the rarest brand of cognac that I wanted to savor for the rest of my life.

"I'm going to taste my wife. My queen," I murmured against her pussy. "And love every fucking second of it."

She was my queen. The way her body shuddered at my touch, the way her beautiful eyes hazed with lust. Her sassy mouth always turned soft after I'd gotten her off.

"Um, what?"

Gently, I spread her legs open with my hands, and I felt her limbs tremble. She was beautiful like that, her wide eyes watching me with anticipation and her cheeks flushed in excitement and embarrassment. Her innocence was evident in every touch she gave me, every word she spoke. But there was also strength underneath it all.

"Keep your eyes on me," I rasped. "Understood?" She nodded, her mouth parted slightly, and the moment I leaned in and swiped my tongue against her slit, a shuddering moan escaped her lips. Her lids lowered, but she did as I commanded, keeping our eyes locked together.

My wife tasted divine. I could have eaten her for days and never sated this hunger for her. I sucked on her little sensitive nub. Her body withered above me, pushing into my mouth, pulling away. But I wouldn't let her pull away. She was mine, to pleasure, to fuck, to use. All fucking mine.

"Oh, Luciano," she moaned, her gaze full of lust through her heavy eyelids. "I'm gonna-"

I pulled away, chuckling darkly. "I'm not done with you yet."

"Luciano-" she protested, her soft body pushing against me, offering herself to me. Like a good little wife.

"You'll come with me inside you," I commanded her in a hoarse voice, rising to my feet. Blood pumped through my veins, my cock rock hard and eager to be in her tight little pussy. "I want to feel your pussy clench around my cock as you come, hear you scream my name."

I turned her around and bent her over the shower bench. Her hands instinctively held on the marble bench. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched me with anticipation, licking her lips. My wife was greedy when it came to pleasure, and I loved that about her.

In one thrust, I filled her to the hilt and she threw her head back, screaming my name. I fucking loved her passion, her enthusiasm. My fingers gripped the soft flesh on her hips, and I fucked her deeper and harder than ever before. And she took all of me, her moans vibrating against the tile, mixing with the sound of shower spray.

"Luciano. Oh, please," she panted, arching her back. My strokes grew harder and more desperate, needing her all. She always begged… my little wife was perfect for me in that regard. She met each one of my thrusts with a pant, taking me deeper and harder till she screamed her pleasure, and I felt her insides grip my cock in a chokehold as she brought me my own, and I spent inside her pussy.

My balls tightened at the memories and I stroked harder and faster, imagining her beautiful ginger red mane in my fist as I pounded into her. My cock pulsed, my orgasm bearing down my spine hard and fast. This was what I had been reduced to, jerking off for years with the images of my wife. Only her!

She was fucking mine!

My cum splattered against the shower wall, the thoughts of her moaning as she sucked me. The memories of her screaming my name when I fucked her hard took me over the edge and this time it was me with her name on my lips.

Finding my release, I felt a fraction of a tension leaving my body. My eyes were still locked on the remains of my wife's possessions in the shower. Wishing for … Fuck, I didn't know what. I didn't dare to even think what I wished for.

If I only knew that day it was the last time I'd have her. From the moment I touched her, she became my vice. The way she moaned my name, melted into my touch… it grated on me that a niece of that fucking Alphonso Romano would be the one to become my addiction.

Where the fuck are you hiding, wife?

She was hiding; I was sure. I couldn't even think of the alternative. She was too young and too stubborn to die. My men had found people that hid in the jungles and deserts but they seemed incapable of locating my wife. Three fucking years and no sign of her. Not even a hint of where she might be.

Every so often there'd be a false alarm, a woman that looked like my wife. But it was never her. Alphonso Romano hid her well. There could be no other explanation. My wife was too naive to be hiding on her own without leaving any traces. The idea of her being under his protection made me want to burn down every single thing the Romano family owned tonight.

I pressed my palms against the cold tile, bent my head forward, and let water rain on me. Three long years. It shouldn't be that hard to find one little woman. After all, the world wasn't that big. But apparently, it was big enough to hide her.

I stepped out of the shower and secured a towel around my waist. The same moment my phone rang. I grabbed it and saw it was an unknown number. It wasn't surprising. We went through burners like guns.

“Yes.”

“It’s Cassio.”

“Didn’t I just see you?” I asked in a dry tone. It would seem lately he, my father, Massimo, along with Alessandro, Luca, and Nico were the only people I talked to.

“I couldn’t get enough of you.”

“Perv. I’m not giving you my ass. Call one of your willing women.”

“I don’t need your ass. I have a willing woman sucking my dick right here,” he chuckled. Fuck, some days I envied him. I couldn’t stomach bedding another woman, or have her suck me off. “She says hi.”

“I hope this is not the only reason you called. Because best friend or not, I will beat your ass next time I see you.”

He laughed again. “I’d like to see you try. Luca might have something...” He trailed off and I waited for him to continue. “The only reason I am telling you this is so you hear it from me before anyone else.” I knew whatever he would tell me next, I wouldn’t like. “Luca’s contact informed him that Alphonso Romano has petitioned to transfer all of his niece’s assets to his name.”

“On what grounds?” I barked out. Was this his way of keeping my wife off my radar? Was she his capital, financing his human trafficking business?

“On the grounds of her being deceased. He claims he has evidence of his niece’s death.”

The phone line went quiet and the silence stretched between us. I didn’t expect that response. I refused to believe the possibility of Alphonso speaking the truth. That motherfucker was born with a lie on his lips. Deadly anger simmered through my veins; the hate I felt even deadlier.

“You there, Luciano?”

“Yes,” I responded. “Thanks for heads up. Tell that hooker to keep you busy so you are not calling me in the early morning hours. Later.”

I hung up. There was nothing more to say. I locked eyes on my form in the mirror in my large bathroom. She loved this fucking bathroom, would spend hours soaking in the tub while reading or working on her assignments.

My phone flew through the air, crashing against the mirror, shattering it into a million pieces. The sound echoed against the tile in the bathroom but the hollow silence still remained. I stood in the middle of the mess I just created and all I could see was that last look my wife gave me with those

stunning violet blue eyes as a lone frozen tear trickled down her cheek, leaving frost in its wake.

The day I forced her to marry me, to use her as a leverage against her family, there was a lone tear that trickled down her face too. I never bothered asking her what it was for. I was focused on my revenge. I planned on using her as leverage against her family but somehow the entire plan went up in flames. Literal flames with the colors of her red hair and violet blues of her eyes.

The instant I saw her strolling into my nightclub with her friend and my men confirmed who she was, I kidnapped her and we were married within two days. Was it a ‘on the fly’ plan?

Yes, it was.

But fuck it. She was so beautiful; I wanted her and the word on the street was that Alphonso Romano valued his niece, using her for his bargaining chip with Cassio’s father. When I took her, I didn’t have qualms about using her and then discarding her - whether that meant killing her or just shoving her into one of my penthouses to never see her again. The problem was that my wife quickly became my obsession and I decided I’d keep her for good. I couldn’t stand to be away from her for longer periods, constantly craving her.

I finally understood the term hooked. I was her junkie.

Luciano, why are you looking at me like that? I could hear her soft voice echo in my brain. *You’re staring.* She’d giggle and her eyes would haze with lust. Her response to me was fucking exhilarating. She could deny she wanted me, but her flushed cheeks always gave her away. She’d give me her body, mold into mine, scream my name as I fucked her hard but she refused to break her allegiance to her family. Always holding back and that damn betrayal caught up. It cost me my entire shipment and Cassio’s. She could have cost us our lives - failing suppliers was deadly in our world.

Fuck, no sense in dwelling on it anymore. At least we recouped our losses fast by bringing in another. Somehow the loss of my wife still lingered though.

I headed into my closet and pulled on a pair of workout pants and a white t-shirt. It was pointless to go to bed now. There would be no sleep coming to me tonight.

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Chapter Four

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GRACE

I frowned at the email. It was unusual for the Ruthless King to want another transaction so soon. He usually kept to two, three max per month.

This would be his fifth. I re-read his email.

TO: THE GHOST
From: Ruthless King

I HAVE ANOTHER BATCH. INTERESTED?

K

IT WAS DANGEROUS. I DIDN'T WANT TO ATTRACT ATTENTION TO MYSELF. IT was the reason we both agreed that sticking to two transactions a month made the most business sense when we started this business relationship. And here we were, barely half a month gone by and he was already asking

for the fifth transaction. I hated to refuse it, knowing it would earn us good money, but it would be worse if we lost it all for being reckless.

Yes, we had it all secured and stashed away but it would be for nothing if we got ourselves killed or locked up.

"What is it, Grace?" Ella asked me. I raised my head to meet her gaze. Matteo was taking a nap so we both worked. "You are frowning so I know something is the matter."

"It is the Ruthless King." She raised her eyebrow. Usually, we liked hearing from him. "He wants another batch cleaned, but it is the fifth one this month. I just think it is too risky."

"Just tell him no then."

"Do you agree, though?"

She met my eyes. "I agree with you. I know you like working with him and he pays well. But it won't help us if we are caught."

I nodded. "I'll just tell him we can't do it."

To: Ruthless King

From: The Ghost

Sorry, I can't do another one this month.

G

I shut down my laptop. I didn't want to get another email from him and be tempted. It was probably best if I didn't check for any messages over the next two weeks. Temptation was a bitch and caving in to the Ruthless King in order to get to that light at the end of the tunnel too fast could be dangerous. For my son, Gabriella, and myself. And we worked too hard to keep safe.

Why did he change his monthly rule? Maybe he lost some of his other contacts. Either way, none of it was our concern. I couldn't help but think about what was driving his need. Unlike other runners, I never connected with any of our clientele over the phone. Ella and I kept it all through scripted email messages. Each email I sent was short and to the point. I never divulged what we did, keeping the language vague. But in times like these, it was hard not to ask for specifics. It would be easier and safer to discuss over the phone, but I wasn't willing to accidentally reveal anything about us. We just had to do this for a few more years and then we'd be out of the game. Ruthless King or any other client wouldn't matter anymore.

Ella and Matteo were my entire world. We looked out after each other because nobody else would look after us. It was a lesson we learned the hard way.

TWO HOURS LATER, MATTEO AND I WERE LEAVING OUT THE DOOR. "I'LL SEE you later, Ella," I shouted before closing the door behind me.

We were in our courtyard when I saw Lucia in the neighboring courtyard. She was in her late seventies but a great woman. When we moved here, she took a chance on us and let us rent this house. This little community was very tight knit and distrustful of strangers. It was what made it perfect to live here.

"Hey there, Lucia," I greeted my landlord. Lucia's English was another perk. It was heavily accented, but it didn't matter to us. It allowed us to communicate.

She gave me a big smile. "Going to the beach?"

"I wish," I told her. "Market."

She walked over. "And how is our boy, Matteo, doing?" Matteo wiggled excitedly. "I think that means he's doing good."

"I think you are right," I agreed. God, it felt good seeing happy people all around me.

Lucia handed my son a cookie. She always kept them on her, just for him.

"What do we say, Matteo?" I reminded him.

"Grazie."

Lucia beamed. She loved it when he responded in Italian. I laughed. “Good job.”

“Where is your sister?”

“Oh, she’s getting ready.” I leaned over and whispered. “She has a date tonight.”

Everyone on the island believed Gabriella and I were sisters. It was easier that way. Besides, even if we were sisters, we couldn’t be closer. Certain experiences in life brought you closer than blood ever could.

She chuckled. “She better be careful with Italian boys. They are wild and reckless.”

“I keep telling her the same, but she won’t listen.”

“And you, dear? Any dates for you?” Lucia was nosy, but for some reason I didn’t mind it. It was a goodhearted nosy.

I chucked. “I got one right now.” I pointed to my son. “He’s the best-looking guy around.”

“Sì, sì. That he is.”

“Okay, I better get going. Do you need me to bring you anything back from the market?”

She thought for a second but then shook her head. “I think not.”

“See you later then.”

I put Matteo in his little stroller, and we started our walk towards the market. The breeze felt good, coming right off the Tyrrhenian Sea. The color of the sea took my breath away every single time. It was turquoise and clear, where you can see the bottom of the sea. And that salty smell that lingered in the air, no matter what time of the season, was just addicting.

“Buon giorno, Gracy.” The ice cream shop owner greeted me with a big, toothless smile. Everyone in Italy seemed to have a problem with pronouncing Grace so I became Gracy. There were times I worried about keeping my first name, but considering Grace wasn’t really an unusual name, I decided against changing it.

I waved and smiled. “Buon giorno, Paolo.”

“Gelato?” *Ice cream.*

I laughed. Dinner time was not for another hour or two. If we had ice cream now, Matteo would never eat his dinner. “Maybe later. After dinner.”

He grinned. We’ve had this conversation several times. He believed it was never a bad time for ice cream. I continued on, but awareness tickled at my neck. My eyes searched out my surroundings. I couldn’t help feeling

like I was being watched. I glanced around me several times but saw nobody.

Probably paranoia, I assured myself.

We kept on walking, and within moments, the market spread in front of us. But the feeling didn't diminish. In fact, it grew with each second. Instead of enjoying my stroll through the market as I usually did, I quickly got the items I needed and cut my outing short. Much to Matteo's dismay.

If only I trusted my instinct!

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Chapter Five

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LUCIANO

We sat around the conference room, in the Vitale skyrise building, the entire Manhattan view stretching on the west wall. The meeting was with the top members of the Columbian crime organization. There were only two of them along with Cassio and myself. We had to keep it low and under the radar. I sent everyone home and ensured there was nobody around to bear witness to this. Luca had ensured that; there was nobody better than him at ensuring people were invisible and things remained unseen. It was Luca's forté.

Just like guns were Alessio's forté, laundering money was mine, and drugs were Cassio's and Nico's. Raphael Santos did a bit of everything but human trafficking was a leftover legacy of his father's that he was working on wiping out. We all did a few other things on the side and had legitimate fronts, usually in the form of casinos, but if I needed a drug shipment, usually I went to Cassio and Nico. For guns, it was always Alessio. Anyone that needed money cleaned, they came to me. There was nobody better at it than Vitale men.

My phone beeped. Throwing a glance at it, I noted a reply from the Ghost. I tilted my phone to Cassio to share the message. We shared a look. I wasn't surprised that the fifth request in less than fifteen days to launder our money was rejected. Neither was Cassio. Nobody wanted to attract attention to themselves.

The Ghost didn't know it, but it was a test, to ensure we could control the transactions over the next few months. I needed to know which one of

my runners would be tempted to get greedy and potentially jump ship when Alphonso reached out to them. He would soon try to do that.

I quickly typed a message back.

To: The Ghost

From: Ruthless King

Good answer. I'd like to book the next six months of your exclusive services. Max three times per month, as initially agreed. Monthly retention two hundred thousand. The percentage fee per transaction remains the same. You accommodate nobody else.

K

That should be clear enough. The last sentence wasn't necessary, but I inserted it to ensure there was no misunderstanding. There was no room for misinterpretation.

I often wondered who the Ghost was. Every runner I used, I had their picture and their phone number. If they fucked me over, I'd be able to hunt them down. Except for the Ghost. That one kept tight security walls, scripted messages, and stuck to codenames. Right upfront the terms were established - no calls, no laundering for human traffickers or sex traders of any kind, no names, limit to three times per month with maximum amount ten million per month.

Right off the bat, I was impressed. In fact, within the first three months of business dealings with the Ghost, I offered them a job on my payroll and found it amusing when it was refused. Several times.

"The first shipment the Romano family expects is in two weeks' time," the head of the Columbian crime organization, Raphael Santos, announced.

He was a tough guy but he hated moving flesh. Luckily for me, he owed me a big favor and would play this game. “He wants drugs and women.”

He will get neither.

When Lombardo Santos died, he left an unpaid debt to Benito King and Alphonso Romano. For the women that were in transit to be delivered to those two assholes. Raphael freed them - without second thoughts or worry to himself. Some he sent back to their homes, others he helped settle all across the States. He needed cash to pay Benito and Alphonso back, with a hefty interest. And that was where I came in. After all, I was *the* money guy. So, I helped him. Of course, in the process he pissed off Benito and Alphonso. It was an added bonus in my book. The only regret was that those two tried to go after his half-sister.

With Raphael running Florida’s underworld, we had the entire East Coast covered. It made Alphonso’s and Benito’s job much harder in smuggling. They even attempted to do it through Vasili’s territory in Russia. Idiots! The Nikolaev family had connections all over that country.

Coincidently, Raphael’s half-sister was married to Vasili Nikolaev. The latter was never our enemy, but he liked to keep to himself and run his own empire. That was fine, but it never hurt to have people on your side. Especially badass guys like Vasili. His connection with Raphael afforded us this. Likewise, it also offered them protection by us as well. When Raphael found out he had a sister, he kept it tight lipped. He only shared it with me, Cassio, Luca and our little gang. It was to conceal his knowledge of the connection with her from the Romano family and Benito King. Those two already tried to kidnap her and the latter two thinking Raphael was clueless played in his favor.

“He needs the first batch of money cleaned next week,” he continued. “He is getting payments in advance of the shipment so he can pay us.” This meant that Romano would soon start reaching out to the runners. He would need someone to clean his dirty money. It wouldn’t be me, and if I could help it, it wouldn’t be any of my good runners either.

“Isn’t he a lucky bastard?”

Raphael grinned. “A very lucky bastard. Even luckier when he doesn’t get it.”

Yes, Alphonso Romano is going down. I would sip on my cognac as I watched him drown. Nothing would bring me more pleasure. I hated the entire Romano family. They killed my mother and sister, and now my wife

too. I shouldn’t mourn her, after all she was a Romano. And she betrayed me, but the thought of never having that woman under me did something to my sanity.

Today the court would decide whether all my wife’s assets would be rolled to her uncle. He wouldn’t have long to enjoy it; none of his family would. I would be their judge, jury, and executioner.

A few more arrangements and the meeting was over.

Raphael and I shook hands, the mutual understanding we held bound us together. “When this is over, don’t call me again, Luciano.”

I grinned. “Oh, don’t be like that. I thought you liked me.”

He grinned back. “I do, but there are limits to how much.”

Once those two were out, I glanced at Cassio. “Have you heard back from the Irish, the Italian Dons, the Russian Sinners, and the rest of the Russian Bratva?”

He nodded. “None of them will do any business with the Romano family. Of course, with the exception of my bastard father.”

“Benito King will get his,” I told him. “I know you and your brother have big plans for him.”

Nobody knew the details, but it didn’t take a genius to figure it out. I strode to the mini bar, pouring us a drink, and one for Luca. He’d be here any moment.

“Luciano, have you thought about-” his words trailed off, but I knew it was coming. And nobody else dared to bring it up. Because I’d smash their face with my bare hands. Cassio was my best friend, but also a man I respected. I had no doubt that eventually he’d overtake his father and rule Benito’s empire, maybe even expand it. I wanted to rule the underworld currency. Cassio wanted to rule all the criminals - and there were plenty that feared him. He felt it was the only way to control human trafficking. Maybe he was right; maybe he wasn’t. Either way, smashing his face, as tempting as it sounded about now, would bring a shitstorm to my front door, which I didn’t have time for right now. “The way you are glaring at me, I can tell you want to beat my ass. But there hasn’t been a single sighting of her in over three years.”

Yes, smashing his face was tempting. Maybe even his ribs.

“Damn straight.” I gulped the entire drink down, the brown liquid burning down my throat. Just like my guilt. If I listened to her, she’d still be here… with me. I should have chained her to my bed and cut all her ties

with her family. It should have been me punishing her, not her uncle. Not her fucking family.

Luca strode into the room, and I handed him his drink.

“If she is dead, you have to move on,” Cassio tried again. If she was dead, I’d never marry again. Yes, I’d take other women to bed, but none of them would ever become my wife. I thought back to those first few months when I tried to fuck any woman, as long as she didn’t resemble my wife. I wanted to hurt my wife, the way she fucking stabbed me in the back, in the heart. Only to find she had disappeared, and her uncle was the one that used her. She was too fucking naive. I shouldn’t have sent her back.

“My resource sent me a message saying Alphonso's request got denied,” Luca chimed in.

My head snapped to him. Did that mean there was hope my wife was alive?

“They are keeping it low, but apparently a scripted message came indicating his niece was alive and well. With a picture taken within the last year, nonetheless.”

“A lot can happen in a year.” Cassio was trying to stop Luca from giving me hope, but I clung to it like a man dying of thirst. Yes, it was stupid considering she’d betrayed me. She probably wouldn’t hesitate to betray me again. If Grace was anything, it was loyal to a fault… just not to me.

“Agreed, but Alphonso Romano claimed his niece was killed over three years ago. His evidence was a three-year-old street surveillance footage with a gun pressed to her temple,” Luca responded. Silence lingered, and we all knew what surveillance Alphonso got his hands on. “By you, Luciano.” It was the footage from that day when I pulled a trigger on her. When I ignored her pleas and watched her tear freeze on her cheek, right along with my heart. “I’m sure you can appreciate the discrepancy in the story.”

I nodded. Someone didn’t want Alphonso to get his filthy hands on his niece’s fortune. The question was how would Alphonso get his hands on that piece of evidence. All of that surveillance data was wiped off, right after Grace was dropped off at the Romano doorstep.

“Could you get the picture?” I shouldn’t ask, but fuck it, why not?

“I thought you’d ask,” he muttered under his breath as he pulled out his phone. “Coming your way.”

My cell beeped, and I had never reached for my phone so fast. I swiped open the picture and enlarged the photo on my iPhone.

A familiar face of a young woman stared at me. A wide smile on her face as she glanced over her shoulder at whoever called out to her. Her face was free of make-up, her eyes a striking color against the blue of her dress. Her full lips tempted a saint; lush, red, and fuck, the naughty words she could come up with. I knew firsthand how good those lips could feel, especially around my cock. A twinge echoed in my chest, and I had to push it away, focusing back on the photo. She wore a light blue summer dress that made her eyes even more striking. She combined it with a large sun hat. I still remembered her fair skin complexion. She was always diligent about applying sunscreen and wearing hats, even in the middle of the winter.

Yes, it was my wife alright.

She didn't seem heartbroken anymore. Her smile was radiant, her eyes twinkling, and whoever she glanced at must have been important to her. It was that peculiar look she had for people she loved or cared about. The soft look and intimate smile played on her face.

I studied the picture, noting a sign behind her. Zooming in on it, I tried to read it. *See You Festival, Freiburg.*

Germany? Was that where my wife was hiding?

"Is that really her?" Luca asked curiously. Raising my head, I noted Cassio studying the picture too. Nobody had ever seen her except for my family. It was by the design. First because I was using her and then because I was jealous as fuck. She was too young for me, but like a thief in the night, I took her and spoiled her for anyone else. I stole her innocence, enjoying every inch of her body while ruining her. And I'd be a fucking liar if I said I didn't enjoy every goddamn second of it.

"Yes." A curt answer as I felt the familiar jealousy brimming inside me.

"Fuck, she is hot," Luca muttered, his eyes never leaving her photo on his phone. "I'd totally do her."

One second my back was to him and the next I faced him, my arm choking the life out of him, his eyes full of surprise. I had no idea how it happened. It must have been a goddamn reflex. My body pinned Luca against the wall as my elbow pushed against his neck, the jealousy and rage swimming through my brain like a red smoky haze.

"Nobody will do her," I growled in rage.

“Fuck, Luciano,” Cassio barked out, trying to peel me off his brother. Unsuccessfully. “Are you crazy?”

“Delete. Her. Picture.” My voice dripped with fury, ready to beat the living shit out of him.

“Jesus, man. Get yourself together,” Luca spoke, although his airflow was somewhat obstructed. “It was just an observation. I didn’t say I ***will*** fuck her.”

“Shut the fuck up, Luca,” Cassio scolded his younger brother. “Luciano, he’ll delete the picture. Actually, I’ll do it myself. Let go of him. And get yourself together.”

I took a step back, but I kept towering over Luca, the adrenaline rushing through my body. Three years and six months - and I still felt that raging possessiveness. Even worse than before, it would seem.

My wife would be the death of me, and she wasn’t even in the close proximity.

“Here! All deleted.” Cassio pointed the phone my way. He didn’t need to show me; I knew he’d do it. I gave him a jerky nod and then returned my attention to his brother.

“Don’t talk about my wife that way,” I gritted out.

He stared at me with a knowing look, but he didn’t know shit. Nobody did.

“So, she’s definitely alive,” Cassio muttered. “I hate to say this, Luciano, but if her uncle is trying to take all her inheritance, the likelihood she is working with him is slim.”

That crossed my mind, too, the moment I heard he was petitioning for my wife’s money.

“Unless, she wants the world to believe she is dead,” Luca countered, “and her uncle is the only way she can get her hands on it.”

And I thought about that too. Goddamn it, I needed to get my hands on my wife and find out all their damn secrets. Their plans.

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Chapter Six

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GRACE

The sounds of the waves crashing along the shores of the little island that became our home was all around us, mixing with the smell of the sea. Sitting on the small balcony, overlooking the water, I sipped on my glass of wine. I felt at peace here. I didn't think I could find happiness again, but right at this moment, it felt pretty damn close to it. Even with the paranoid feelings I'd had when I rushed out of the market and barricaded Matteo and myself in the house.

It was stupid, I knew it. If either my uncle or my husband found us, we'd be dead before we knew what hit us. We would never see it coming. My uncle was a sick, twisted old man that got off on power and torturing humans.

Mom just finished her performance at Metropolitan Opera House in New York city. I headed backstage to see her. I felt hurt and anger in my chest, which never happened when it came to my parents.

Hearing my mom sing her last song and dedicate it to a man in the audience, someone I have never heard of. A man! It didn't make any sense at all. It was my parents' song. Did she not love Dad anymore?

Roxette's "Listen to your heart" was Mom and Dad's wedding song, a memory of their love that endured hardships. Neither one of them ever told me what those were, but whatever it was, it always put worry on Dad's face and fear on Mom's. They told me it was what sealed them together - listening to their own hearts. So why did Mom dedicate it to another man?

The shuffle of the crew of producers, various orchestra musicians, stage managers, and technical staff made it too crowded.

“Hey Grace,” the stage manager called out to me, a wide, happy smile on his face. I guess that meant my mother’s performance was a hit. But something didn’t sit well with me. Didn’t they know that my mother sang a song that was meant for Dad and she dedicated it to a stranger? That wasn’t right!

“Hello, Mr. Tony,” I greeted him. Benefit of spending a lot of time here; I knew everyone, every single member by their first and last name. “Have you seen my mom?”

“She’s in her dressing room.”

“Thanks.” I waved him goodbye and kept on going. Every so often, I’d bump into another backstage worker, greet them, and carry on, determined to talk to my mom. She always said I could ask her any questions or talk to her about anything that troubled me.

Well, this troubled me.

As I neared Mom’s dressing room, I heard raised voices. My pulse sped up with fear. Whose voices were those? I thought I recognized Mom’s voice, but I wasn’t sure. I never heard her yell.

My parents never raised their voices. Not at each other, not at me. Yes, I heard my dad use a grumbled elevated voice at his advisors but it was always with frustration. This sounded more threatening, ugly, mean. What were they saying? I couldn’t make out the words. My heart pounded in my chest, an unfamiliar feeling of fear increasing with each step closer to the cracked door to Mom’s dressing room.

“You will never have her.” Yes, that was Mom’s voice. “Never! As long as there is a breath left in me or Kennedy, you’ll never have her.”

“You just wait and see,” the stranger’s voice was dark and threatening. My ears rang, as my breathing hitched. What were they talking about? “You better listen to your fucking heart and save Kennedy. Because there is nothing you can do to save her.”

“Get out,” she screamed, her beautiful voice that awed the world shaking, and for the first time ever, I heard a terror in my mother’s voice. “Get out. Kennedy will hear of this.”

I leaned forward and could see the tall man through the open door. There were two of them in there, one older and one younger, but only the older one was talking. Instinctively, I knew the older one was more dangerous.

“He knows he can’t do anything about this.” He smirked, disgust on his face. “You two listened to your hearts instead of reason, now it is time to pay the price. You two can have more children. Be smart and say goodbye to this one.”

I watched through the crack of the open door as my mom’s hand flew through the air and connected with the man’s cheek. Smack.

His face turned dark, his whole posture threatening and he took a step, towering over her.

“Aria-”

“Get the fuck out!” I froze in fear as I watched the man’s hand curl around her slim neck.

“It is as easy as this,” he growled. “Snap your neck, and it’s over.”

I took a step forward, everything inside of me screaming to help my mom. As if I could stop him. The floor creaked under my black Mary Jane black shoes. I was still in my school uniform. Both of their eyes snapped to me. One full of fear and one with a look I couldn’t quite describe. Like he was evaluating me.

“Mom?” I didn’t like this man. There should be guards here. Where were Dad’s men that always watched over her and me?

“You must be Grace.” I swallowed hard, remaining glued to my spot, my eyes darting between my mom’s terrified face and this man’s cruel one. I had no idea why but I kept my mouth closed, refusing to say anything to him. “Nice uniform. Good little Catholic girl. That will come in handy.”

I didn’t understand what he was saying. He didn’t make any sense. My eyes lowered to his hand that was still on my mother, his filthy fingers curled around my mother’s pale neck. A fear that he could hurt her swelled with each thump in my chest.

Suddenly, his hand lowered, and he took a step back. Without a glance at my mother, his eyes on me, he strode past me.

“Remember my words, Aria.”

And they were gone. Like boogeymen in the dark of night. With her back against the wall, my mom’s body slid down till her butt connected with the floor. She was so shaken up that her whole arms shook as she spread them open. Without thinking, I ran to her and lowered myself onto the floor, burying my body against hers.

“Mom, are you okay?” My voice shook, just like her hands that kept brushing against my face.

“My little Grace,” my mother’s voice was soft as she brushed hair out of my face. “My precious baby.”

“Who was that?” I asked in a whisper. I was scared he’d come back.

“Nobody important, love.” My mother never lied to me, but I knew she lied to me that day. I felt it in my gut. “Promise me that no matter what happens, you will keep strong. For me. For Dad.”

I raised my head, searching out her eyes.

“I promise, Mom.” I wasn’t sure if I could keep that promise, but it seemed so important to her. I wanted to ease her worry and fears that were edged so deep onto her face now. If it would help her, I would have promised anything that day.

“You’ll always be my little Grace.” A soft, warm fluttering feeling blossomed inside me at hearing those words. I loved my mom and dad. Even more, I loved their affections for each other. I loved their hugs and kisses, but my stubbornness insisted I pretended they were annoying. Though right now, I needed all her comfort, and I sensed she needed mine too. “Never let anyone clip your wings, my baby.”

“I won’t, Mom,” I promised.

God, if only I knew how hard it would be to keep that promise. How hard it was to be strong. Mom and Dad died three months later. It was then I found myself face-to-face with the very same man that had threatened my mother. He turned out to be my uncle. A man my parents had kept me hidden from. Imagine being a child and not knowing you had other family. Never having met your uncle or grandmother. It was a nightmare after that… until the day I met Luciano. I thought I found a savior. So wrong!

Tilting my head up at the moon, my thoughts traveled across the ocean, searching the memories. The past was left buried and behind us when we ran, but it was harder to forget. It was a constant exercise of discipline to make myself not think about him.

The image of my husband’s face flashed in front of my eyes. Even after all this time, the memories hurt. I fell in love with a true villain and learned my lesson. In the hardest way possible. I would never let another man in. Maybe one of these days I’d get brave and take another man into my bed. Although I knew with unquestionable certainty that nobody would ever compare to my husband. The way my body hummed for him, needing his touch.

All the fucked-up shit that happened and I still craved his hands on me; the way he brought me pleasure. And I hated myself for it. I wanted him out of my heart and out of my system. I didn't want to remember him; the way his mouth felt on my skin or the way his touch lifted me to unimaginable heights. All the while, he crushed my heart like it was worthless, like I was worthless.

A shuddering breath left my lips as I brought my glass of wine to them. This was the reason I always avoided thinking about him. It made me feel like shit.

Reaching over to the side table for my laptop. I checked my emails. It was better than thinking about the bitter past.

Only one email sat in the secured mailbox.

To: The Ghost

From: Ruthless King

Good answer. I'd like to book the next six months of your exclusive services. Max three times per month, as initially agreed. Monthly retention two hundred thousand. The percentage fee per transaction remains the same. You accommodate nobody else.

K

So he was testing me! I didn't like it; it felt manipulative. I was done being manipulated. But could we afford to refuse his business? No, we couldn't. Instead of replying, I closed the email and stared at the blank Google Search page. I was so tempted to use it. All I had to do was type in my family's name or my husband's name, and I knew there would be information flowing through the web browser. I had so many questions, but I knew they wouldn't bring me any good answers. Nor any peace.

Curiosity killed the cat, Grace. I needed to remember that.

"What are you doing sitting in the dark, staring at your laptop?" Ella's voice startled me, and I almost dropped my laptop.

“Damn it. You scared the crap out of me.” I looked behind me to find Ella standing, leaning against the door. “You are home early.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I just wasn’t in the mood to listen to the Italian accent tonight.”

“I see.” In Ella’s language, it meant she was homesick. Maybe I was too, hence for the trip down memory lane.

She came around and sat down on the other chair. I handed her my glass of wine and she took it, gulping it down.

“What’s going on?” she questioned after emptying the glass.

“I checked my emails. Ruthless King was testing us with that fifth transaction.” Her brows frowned in confusion. “I don’t know what it is about. He wants us to do exclusive transactions for him over the next six months, no more than three a month.”

“Weird.”

“Yes. I didn’t reply.”

“Are you going to refuse?”

I shook my head. “No, but maybe we can renegotiate a higher fee cut if we are exclusive. Although he did offer a monthly retainer fee too.”

She nodded in agreement. “It doesn’t hurt to ask for more.”

We both stared over the dark seas; the silence broken only by the sound of waves crashing against the shoreline. The smell of the sea soothed my soul, and I hoped it did the same for Ella. Some days were harder than others. Yes, we loved it here and wanted to settle down, but we still missed home sometimes. We knew we couldn’t go back to the States without putting our lives at great risk.

“I have to tell you something, Grace.” Ella’s quiet voice shattered the silence. My eyes shifted to her. She sounded serious. “You won’t like it.”

“As long as you are not leaving me, we’ll figure out everything else.” I meant it too. Without Ella, I would have been so alone over the last three and a half years.

“Duh, I’m never leaving you,” she replied without hesitance. “We might not be blood related, but we are sisters for life.” She was right; she was more family to me than all my living blood family. She took a deep breath in and then exhaled. “When I went to the main island, I checked out the U.S. news.” I wouldn’t scold her. Not even thirty minutes ago, I was tempted to do the same. I held my breath, waiting for whatever was to

come. “Your uncle filed a petition to transfer all your assets to him due to the evidence you are deceased.”

I stared at her, sure that I heard it wrong. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“He had evidence that I’m dead? That doesn’t make any sense.” Although, I’d never put it past my uncle and my family to proclaim me dead to get their paws on my inheritance. My parents had enough sense to secure it all into a trust till my twenty-fifth birthday. Which was coming up rapidly.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. “It pissed me off that he’d rob you of what’s yours. So I sent evidence through a secured mail that you are alive, along with the picture.”

It wasn’t a smart thing to do. She knew it, and so did I. But I understood why she did it. I would have probably done the same if our roles were reversed. After all, that inheritance belonged to my son too.

“Damn, I hope it’s one of the good pictures,” I replied instead of scolding her. She was beating herself up enough as it was. We locked eyes and burst into fits of giggles. It wasn’t funny that my family pretty much took everything from me and now went after the inheritance too. But crying wouldn’t help us.

“I sent the one from our rave party in Germany.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, that one is not too bad.”

Turning my head back out, facing the sea, I stared at the moon’s reflection against the surface of the waves. It was so peaceful in this little corner of the world. You could almost pretend all the evil of this world didn’t exist. But it did, lurking in the shadows. My family was a big part of it.

Money, the root of all evil, but we couldn’t live without it. Ella and I learned that the hard way, after struggling. In the first three months, we moved from one European city to the next every two weeks, scared that we would be found. We tried hard to watch our money, but unfamiliar with going without, we didn’t do a good job. We were both constantly tired and initially lost weight. Even with my pregnancy progressing, it felt like whatever little clothes I had, they hung loose on me.

Two girls in the big, scary world. If we were killed nobody would have missed us. Because we were ghosts, traveling with fake documents either via train or bus, dragging from hostel to hostel, sometimes even sleeping at

train stations. We kept our heads down and to ourselves. We often lost track of where we were. Sometimes I'd break down and cry at the cruelty of it all, and Ella would comfort me. Other times, she'd have a meltdown, and I'd help her through it. We survived because we had each other.

As the cash became frighteningly low, we started looking for jobs. Anything that would help us make a little money and survive. Our limited language skills were our downfall. We even got so desperate that we tried pickpocketing. Neither one of us managed a single one successfully so we gave that one up. But we had a little break with the last guy, Dietrich, we tried to steal from. He was a runner for a local crime gang. He cleaned their money and offered to pay us the commission if we helped him.

It came down to starving and living on the streets or giving this a try. The best part was that the guy maintained he did all the laundering himself with his supplier. It didn't matter to Ella and I, as long as we got paid.

It benefited us to be off everyone's radar, and it was the reason that Ella and I set up layers of security as we grew our customers. We quickly started finding our own clients… well, criminals if I was being honest and we grew. We were both determined we wouldn't be hungry again or search for somewhere to sleep safely in the middle of the night.

Dietrich unknowingly saved our lives. Ella and he dated for a bit. We never told him our story, but he picked up on the fact that we didn't want to be found. So, he gave us pointers on how to be invisible, how to make money on the black market and remain hidden from the suppliers.

We worked hard to keep ourselves invisible, and for the first time ever, I wondered if maybe I should just let my family get their dirty paws on my inheritance. It wasn't worth my life, Matteo's, nor Ella's. We didn't need millions. If I worked for Ruthless King for a few more years, we'd be settled for life.

"What are you thinking, Grace?"

"I'm not sure. On one hand, I want to fight for what's mine," I admitted. "But on the other hand, I don't think it is worth putting all of us in danger for it."

If anyone understood, it was Ella. "I agree. But it bothers me to think about him getting away with so much. Look how many people he hurt."

She was right. My uncle hurt her family, ruining them financially. All because her father refused to be part of human smuggling with him and

Benito King. Yes, her father was a dirty politician, but at least he had some scruples.

I suspected my uncle had caused my parents' death and that was barely scratching the surface. He would have killed me and Ella too, or worse. He would have sold me to satisfy my family's long-standing tradition. God knew, the Romano family had a reputation to uphold as producing some of the best for their fucked-up arrangement.

We didn't have any choice. We had to run away, in the dead of the night, like two thieves. It was either run or die. Ella and I weren't strong enough to take them all down.

"We've been slowly chipping away at him financially," I murmured.

"It's not enough," she hissed. "It won't be enough till he-" She cut herself off, her lip trembling.

I knew she was right. If it was just me, I'd jump right in and cause havoc. I wanted to hurt my family and make them pay. But even more, I wanted Matteo safe. Just the thought of him getting anywhere close to my family rattled my bones with true terror. They wouldn't hesitate to use my son, just to get what they want.

"I'm sorry, Grace," she muttered. "Sometimes the thirst for revenge just chokes me, and then makes me act stupid."

I shook my head. "You have nothing to apologize for. It is how I feel too. Especially when I think about how he almost-" The words faltered, my throat constricted. "The last thing I want is for them to take more advantage of me, but Matteo is more important to me than all that. But you did the right thing by sending a picture," I told her. "We'll just have to be careful not to have it traced back to here. I kind of like it here."

"I was careful." I knew she would be. "I like it here too, but it would be nice to have an option to visit back. You know?"

I nodded in agreement. My family was her only obstacle. We met in the boarding school, our first year of high school, but I knew about Ella and her family for months beforehand. Her father was a crooked politician that crossed paths with my uncle who made a fatal mistake in dealing with my uncle to secure a passage for his smuggling. Her father provided a state port passage, but he realized too late what it was used for. Human trafficking for Benito King. He should have asked better questions, done his homework. Instead, the idiot only saw dollar signs. When her dad started backpedaling, my uncle demanded the payment back with hefty interest. Her father didn't

have the money, so he promised his daughter. But then he started running his mouth, and my uncle killed him and his wife, brutally. The only reason I knew was because I eavesdropped on his conversation. So, he took charge of Ella - not out of pity or sorrow. He took her in to protect his investment.

Of course, it was always us women that paid the price for men's stupidity and cruelty. We were just pawns in their stupid games. Unlike Ella, for me, even if my uncle and family that wanted me dead were eliminated; I'd still not be able to go back. Because my husband wanted me dead too.

But we refused to be victims and just take it. It was the reason I told Ella what I learned about her parents' death when we met. We bonded instantly, and we might have been young, naive girls but we wouldn't be willing victims. We started researching and studying the men from the mafia world that did business with Benito. We refused to be sitting belles waiting for our ruin. Ella and I were stronger together.

If we only prepared for falling in love too. We wanted to bring those fucking ruthless men to their knees and make them pay, but we didn't count on our hearts playing too.

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Chapter Seven

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LUCIANO

Everyone was staying the fuck away from me. It suited me just fine, if only I wasn't frustrated as fuck. How hard was it to find an American woman roaming Europe with a friend? Apparently too fucking hard. Massimo, my cousin, happened to be in Italy, so I ordered him to make a stop in Germany, to find any clues about my wife. He was one of the rare people that knew her and saw her. And I trusted him not to try to fuck her.

That was two weeks ago! He went to Germany, then went back to Italy. He was due to go back to Germany again to continue. It has been two long weeks and nothing. He came up with nothing, not a single clue. Like she was a ghost.

"Luciano," my father's voice caught me in the hallway.

I turned around to face him. His eyes were the same shade as mine, our facial features similar too. He was in his seventies, but my father still looked strong. The death of my mother and sister hit him hard, but his will to live spiked when I got married. Grace captured him effortlessly, regardless of her lineage and her last name. He considered her Vitale the moment he met her. The day Grace and I said our vows, he claimed her as his daughter.

Despite the fact she was forced to marry me, under the threat of death, she smiled at him, offering him a hug and kiss on the cheek. Our wedding, although thrown together fast, was a real deal. Yes, I had to drag her out of her room, under threat of shooting the door down but the moment we said *I*

do, and our lips connected, our union was sealed. Marriages were forever in our world.

The way he beamed on the day of our wedding, proud and happy. As if all his life goals had been achieved and he could die in peace. And though Grace bickered with me, stood up to me all the time, she played the perfect daughter-in-law to my father. There was no hiding that she actually enjoyed spending time with him. They'd sit and talk for hours - about Pa's hometown in Sicily, about plants he grew, about her friend Ella, Italian food… anything and everything. She'd play piano for him, his favorite tunes of Andrea Bocelli, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin. When I came around, she'd put her reserved walls up; not that I could blame her.

She had my father's heart, without even trying from the start. She had good instincts, I'd give her that. Because there was nobody more I trusted than my father.

He had been my role model my entire life, taught me everything I knew. But he hasn't been happy with me lately. He hasn't said it, but I knew it. He blamed me for losing my wife, for not having children.

"Father," I greeted him.

"Did Massimo find your wife?" I should have known it was about her.

"Not yet." I kept my voice cool, hiding my own frustration at the delay.

"What will you do if she doesn't want to come back?"

I watched my old man wondering why he would care so much about her. After all, she betrayed us. Honesty, respect, and trust were the foundation of any relationship, business or personal. He taught me that.

I never told my father all that happened that day except that she betrayed our shipment location. He didn't believe it. My old father was actually on her side, defending her. After that, the only thing he told me that day was that Vitale men never let their women go, and he never taught me to be ruthless to women.

By the time I went to get her, she was already gone.

"She won't have a choice," I answered my father. "She is my wife and her place is here." In our world, divorce was non-existent. It is till death do us part, literally.

He nodded, pleased with my answer. I wondered what was going through his head. Without another word, he carried on to the patio and towards his garden he maintained. That garden has been his only consolation since my mother's and sister's deaths. When Grace came into

the picture, she'd help him mess around in there, but since her disappearance, he kept himself busy expanding it.

Grace was Papà's willing pupil when it came to his garden. It was as if he kept it going for her, waiting for her to come back. She told him she loved white lilies so he had a whole section dedicated to white lilies and nurtured them, like they were his children.

I knew from the background I had Roberto, the man that worked for me for the past thirteen years, run on Grace, she had never stepped foot in the garden before meeting my father. Her life was a fancy, golden gilded cage from the moment she was born.

Her parents had guards assigned to her even before she was born. She was treated like royalty, a combination of Astor and Romano family legacy pretty much making her an American princess. The odd part was that for all of Grace's famous family on her mother's and father's side, there was not much in her background. Her father, while being a Romano, chose to become an ambitious political figure with the whisperings of presidential potential. Her mother was a famous opera singer that came from a wealthy family.

Once her parents died in a car accident, her uncle and grandmother took her in and information on Grace became even more scarce. For years, nobody even knew what she looked like or where she was. Once a public darling figure, she vanished like smoke. The boarding school she attended kept her secluded just as her family had done.

It was Massimo that ran into her information and obtained her picture by sheer accident when he hacked into the Juilliard School. He was helping his old friend get his sister into a program there and those two wanted to check where she stood before manipulating the results to ensure she got it. Imagine the surprise finding out that Grace Romano, the only descendant of the great Romano legacy, lived right in my backyard.

Sophia and Alphonso Romano protected her like a rare treasure, keeping her out of the public eye. She was their most valuable asset. I didn't have a doubt that they trained her to be a *true* Romano. After all, she had proven herself when she betrayed me at the first opportunity. She threw away what we could have had, could have been, for her loyalty to her family.

When she walked into my nightclub, I thought destiny brought her to my doorstep, handing her over on a silver platter to avenge the killings of

my mother and sister. But now I wondered if it wasn’t a trap, a well-played web thrown over me.

I shook my head and swallowed the bitter pill memories kept bringing, then headed to the house exit. From here, I would see my helicopter in the distance. Roberto was already there, waiting for me. He wasn’t family but he had proven himself enough. He was thirty-five years old, five years younger than me and despite his loyalty, I had never brought him into my inner circle. I paid him well, but the cruelty that lurked in his eyes didn’t sit well with me. Yes, it was necessary to survive this world, but even cruelty had to have limits.

“How is the weather today for flying?” I asked him.

“Perfect skies,” he retorted. “I’ll get you there safely.”

I nodded and got in. I could fly the helicopter myself but usually preferred to catch up on my business on the way to the city. Our family home was an hour outside the city, although I had a large penthouse there too. And a few apartments where I used to stash women I banged. But that was before Grace. Now they just sat empty or rented. I didn’t even know, since they were part of my vast real estate portfolio.

It took no time to land on the roof of the skyrise building I owned, in the middle of the city. I descended from the rooftop and directly into the conference room where the meeting waited to start.

I nodded all around the table and sat down at the head of it, Roberto immediately to my left. Usually that spot was reserved for Massimo, but he had a more important mission to handle. Namely, hunting down my wife. It worked out well that he was in Europe already even before I needed him to track her down.

The meeting started, each department head updating me with the status. This was the legitimate side of my business, the one that allowed me into a majority of the buildings in New York. In this city, I was the Ruthless King. Luciano Vitale's name was feared right along with the name of Cassio King.

My phone rang, and I glanced at it. It was Massimo.

“Gentlemen,” I stood up. “Roberto will lead this meeting. I have to take this call.”

I trusted Roberto to handle this business, and I had competent people running the departments so there was no doubt business would be handled. It didn’t mean I trusted those people any more than the next person. I only

hired the best, and I knew each person in this room understood their job. Otherwise, they wouldn't be here.

Nodding at Roberto, I gave him a silent command to take care of this. His long years of service and loyalty earned him the trust to run my legitimate business. I would check the meeting minutes later, because there would never be full trust there. Whether it was my distrusting nature or the fact he wasn't family, I wasn't sure. Roberto hasn't done anything to earn that distrust. He was an orphan and considered this job, the men he worked with, part of his family. Those were his words and God knew he had proven himself over and over again.

I strode away without a backward glance. When it came to Grace, I didn't give a shit about any meetings, as long as everyone did their job and profits came in. Finding my wife was the top priority right now.

Once I was out of the meeting room, I strode to my office and shut the door.

"Massimo."

"Luciano, I need you to come to Sicily."

"What the fuck are you doing in Sicily?" I growled. "You are supposed to be looking for my wife. In Germany!"

I would kill him myself. Once he came back, I'd strangle him with my bare hands.

"There is a woman here. I think it might be her." A deep exhale came over the line. "I just happened to be roaming the street, meeting an old friend, and this woman caught my eye. I think it's her."

Luciano, you are staring. Her soft voice resonated in my chest and my brain.

My chest tightened, but I willed it to harden. *Her* could be only one woman. *Grace, my wife.*

"Are you sure?" None of my men have been able to find her for the past three and a half years. I didn't want another false alarm.

"No, I'm not, but she sure reminds me of her."

"Where in Sicily?"

Of all the places in the world, I never expected her to hide in Sicily. It was where my parents were from.

"She lives in Favignana, but I spotted her in Cefalù." Cefalù was the hometown where both of my parents were born. Maybe hiding in plain sight worked too well for her.

“What made you look there?”

“Actually, I wasn’t looking. Your father asked me to check on your aunt,” he explained. “I was here already anyhow. So before I went to Germany, I made a stop. She told me there were two American girls living here. For the past nine months. I didn’t think anything of it, but then when I was meeting an old friend, he pointed the woman out. It fucking looked like her. So I followed her. I have been following her for the past two weeks, wanting to make sure. I went to Germany for two days but nobody from that festival knew anything about any American girls. Then I came back again. And fuck, I think it is them. I’m pretty sure Grace is here with her friend, Ella.”

I stared out the window, silence stretching over the phone. I could still see her violet-blue eyes staring at me in fear, the tears streaming down her face. It couldn’t be helped. It had to be done.

“Bring her back,” I told him in a hard tone.

A heartbeat of silence.

“There is something else too, Luciano.”

“What?”

“There is a kid. I think it is hers. Locals wouldn’t divulge too much, but I’m told the baby is hers.”

Bitterness slithered through my veins like poison. Grace had a baby, while still married to me. Anger and jealousy tasted like acid.

Fuck, what did I expect? I knew she’d move on. She was a beautiful girl, and I was sure she’d turn into a beautiful woman. Men’s gazes always lingered after her. Her ginger hair, her eyes like the deepest sapphires, and her body that brought men to their knees.

Maybe it is not her, my reason whispered. Once we started sleeping together, she told me she didn’t want kids, not for a while. I wanted them right away, but considering she was barely twenty-one, and I uprooted her whole life, I agreed to wait. It was the least I could do.

“Change of plans. Don’t approach them.” It was foolish to have Massimo cause trouble for no reason if the woman wasn’t even Grace. This was how much that fucking woman messed with my brain. Even just the thought of her made me make irrational moves. “I’ll be there tomorrow morning to confirm if it’s her,” I told him.

I left, shooting a quick message to Roberto to handle the rest of the meeting.

I STOOD AT THE CORNER OF THE STREET. I HAD BEEN ON THE ISLAND FOR the past twenty-four hours and my patience was running thin. I hadn't seen the woman nor the child. For whatever reason, the routine that the woman had for the days that Massimo watched her went out the window. As if she knew I was here.

It was a charming little home. Nothing extravagant, little stone villa with a yard and an open view to the sea. Grace grew up surrounded by luxury, waited on hand and foot. This place was opposite of everything she was used to. I was starting to doubt Massimo had mistaken someone else for Grace.

The garden gate opened and a woman came out. She had a baseball hat on, black shorts and white, racer tank top. A ponytail looped through her baseball hat, and I silently cursed. What the fuck was Massimo thinking? This woman's hair was nothing like Grace's.

Grace had a thick mane of ginger wavy hair and this woman had smooth brown hair. I ground my teeth at disappointment. I was getting tired chasing after my wife all over the globe. I was just tired. Period.

My eyes traveled over the woman's body, and I couldn't help but admire her curves. Her skin was the color of light golden tan, like she spent a lot of time in the sun. But underneath that barely there tan, you could tell she had a fair complexion. She was a beautiful young woman, similar build as my wife.

She stuffed her headphones into her ear, then stretched her legs. They were long and toned. The hat was pulled down far on her forehead, and I wished I could see her face that was hidden by the hat.

A minute of stretching and she took off into a light jog. I watched her till she disappeared from the view, a sinking feeling heavy in my stomach.

Where are you, Grace? The silent question lingered on my lips.

I would find her eventually. She couldn't hide from me forever. Before my life was over on this Earth, I'd find her. Fuck, I'd bury myself into her and inhale her scent, drown in her stunning eyes. Her betrayal didn't diminish my need for her.

Not. One. Fucking. Bit.

I headed back to the house Massimo had rented for the week. Fucking waste of time. I would catch this afternoon's ferry off the island. Just as I

was getting ready to enter the gate of our own residence, I saw the woman again jogging along the beach. Her body was covered in a light sweat. Although there was a light breeze coming off the sea, the temperature was already rising. It tended to stay warm in these parts till late October and the winters were mild.

My eyes lingered on the jogger, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from her, her body soft despite the physical exercise that she obviously put her body through. She raised her hand and waved. I followed the direction of her greeting and saw her waving at the ice cream shop owner.

Definitely not Grace. She never socialized with people outside her circle. Gabriella was her only friend and both of them kept their circle small. In fact, Grace hated being the center of attention anywhere and everywhere. And most of all, she hated physical exercise.

I entered the house with the bitter taste in my mouth.

"Did you see her?" It was Massimo's greeting to me. He was sure that was her.

"That's not her," I told him, heading for the little mini bar. It was barely nine in the morning, but I needed a stiff one.

The look of disbelief on his face was almost comical, if it wasn't for the heavy lead in my stomach. And agitation.

"Fuck, I was sure that was her," he muttered. "And that friend of hers. Both of them."

"I didn't see her friend, but the woman I saw couldn't be Grace nor her friend."

I strode over to the balcony, overlooking the sea. My wife's fucking eyes were haunting me. Everything about her was taunting me, reminding me of what I could have had. If only I hadn't fallen for one Romano.

"We are catching the first ferry in the afternoon."

"That's at three p.m."

It couldn't be fucking soon enough.

I needed to get back to business. Bringing down the Romano family.

Several hours later, Massimo loaded our luggage into the car. We sat in the back of the convertible, waiting for the damn driver to get moving. I felt the tension itching my skin, the pressure of the day ready to explode. It was all *her* fault. She had the worst effect on me.

The driver finally decided to get a move on. He drove so slowly, I might as well have walked to the damn ferry. I took a deep breath, keeping a lid on

my temper. It wasn’t his fault I couldn’t locate my wife.

Until the latest stunt her uncle pulled, trying to proclaim her dead and get all Grace’s inheritance, I was convinced her family was financing her hideout. Otherwise, there was no way she could have survived on the run for that long. And with a friend at that. But now I wasn’t so sure. Now, I questioned everything.

Goddamn woman!

We approached the ice cream shop by the beach and my eyes traveled over the few guests sitting there. I spotted the jogger from this morning right away. She didn’t have a baseball hat on anymore, but I’d recognize that body anywhere. Her back was to us, leaned against the stone flower bed, speaking with a few women and the old man who I guessed must be the ice cream shop owner. She wore a light white summer thinned strap dress, her thick brown hair falling down her back in a soft shining curtain.

“Damn, I was sure that was her,” Massimo muttered under his breath, spotting her. “Different hair but-”

The driver stopped at the crosswalk to allow pedestrians to cross. I hated that I kept staring at the woman. I had sunglasses on so at least it wasn’t visible. There was just something about her that was captivating. No other woman besides Grace ever captured my attention like this. One of the other women spoke vividly, like there was a fucking mime show going on.

Curiosity had me watching her like a hawk, eager to see at least part of her face. Her arms twisted behind her back, her right hand wrapping around her left wrist, stretching her back. I narrowed my gaze. It was something Grace used to do.

The driver shifted the gear into drive.

“Stop,” I ordered him.

The woman was completely oblivious to anyone but her friend speaking to her. The words of an Italian woman with a heavy accent traveled over, her hands up in the air. I had no idea what she said, but the young jogger threw her head backwards and a melodious laugh traveled over the sea fragrant breeze to me. And my heart froze.

“What is it, Luciano?” Massimo asked.

“Wait,” I told him.

I waited for another sound from her. I just needed to hear a word leave those lips, hear her voice, and I’d know for sure.

Massimo and I sat in the car, in the middle of the road by the ice cream shop but nobody seemed to care. This place was so small, there was not even a need for a car.

Another melodious laughter.

“Mamma, Mamma.” A child’s voice reached over, but I kept my eyes locked on the woman. I refused to blink, worried I’d miss a clue. Like it was a life-or-death situation.

The woman turned her head in the direction of the little boy’s voice and that’s when I saw her. That fair, creamy skin with a light tan and luscious lips curved in happiness.

“Hey baby,” she exclaimed and ran towards the little boy, a wide smile spread on that beautiful face. Her profile, her mouth, that nose. Fuck, it was her.

“It’s her.” My voice strained. Fuck, maybe it shook for a second too, but I kept my eyes glued on her form. There was no way I'd let her out of my sight now. She colored her ginger red hair into a rich brown. I didn’t like it. Scratch that, I hated it. But her voice, her smile, her face… they were all still there.

She looked radiant, happy. The smile on her lips used to be the one she gave me. She used to smile only at me like that. But not anymore. She was at the boy’s side in a few quick strides and picked him up into the air, while he giggled happily, spreading his hands wide open.

“Mamma,” he squealed. The boy couldn’t be older than three, maybe two.

The anger and bitterness swelled inside me. I had never felt hatred like this. And I fucking hated her uncle. Hated her family. But this was different, even more personal. It was hate mixed with regret, and another feeling I wasn’t willing to analyze.

Grace’s happy laugh carried on over to us. Everyone’s eyes were on them, smiling. They all knew her. The little boy had a beach hat on that hid his face from my sight. I wondered if he looked like his mother, had her eyes. I reluctantly had to admit that my wife was even more beautiful now than when I met her. The naive and scared young woman of barely twenty-one was gone and in her place was a beautiful woman that took your breath away. And I still wanted her, even seeing her with a child by another man. I needed her like the oxygen I breathed.

Well, I’ll have to suffocate that need! By any means necessary.

“Hey, woman. I want a happy greeting like that, too.” I recognized her best friend; she changed her hair too.

Grace chuckled softly. “Awww, Ella. I missed you, baby.” A burst of laughter echoed, carrying on the breeze, mixing with ocean waves.

All three of them seemed happy. Truly happy.

The memory of that last time I saw my wife played on repeat in my mind. The look of finality in her eyes as I pulled the trigger and then sent her away. It looked like she got over it pretty damn quick.

“Who wants to go to the beach?” Grace’s soft voice teased. It was even softer than I remembered. Her happy laughter mixed with the sounds of the waves, the smell of the sea salt air in the breeze. It would forever remind me of my own bitterness and loss.

“Io. Io.” The boy beamed. “Mama, giù.” He demanded to be put down.

“First my kisses.” She showered kisses on the boy's belly and he wiggled. It felt like being stabbed over and over again, in the sweetest agony.

“Mama, giù,” he demanded, giggly.

“Little boy is bossy,” the ice cream shop owner yelled over to my wife with a wide smile. “Must be like his papà.”

Grace glanced in the direction of the old man and smiled. “No, he’s better than his papà.”

Who is the boy’s father?

The boy put his chubby hands on Grace’s face, and she kissed his palms one at the time.

“Gelato,” he demanded.

“He is turning into an Italian,” Ella, her best friend, came up to both of them as Grace put the boy onto his feet. “He’s speaking more Italian than English.”

Grace chuckled. “Seems appropriate since we are in Italy. C’mon, Ella. Let’s go get a gelato.”

Ella groaned. “Ugh, not you too.”

Grace laughed happily. “Don’t worry. It is one of the few words I know.” She turned her eyes to her son. “So gelato then spiaggia?” Grace playfully shoved her shoulder against her friend, as she uttered the word *beach* in Italian.

I exited the vehicle. Massimo right behind me. I stepped forward; Massimo stood firm behind me. Each step I took closer to my wife,

excitement and anger mixed in my blood.

“Fancy seeing you here, wife,” I greeted her in a cold voice.

Her eyes, even bigger and deeper than I remembered them, snapped to me, startled. Actually, startle was too mild of a word. I scared the living shit out of her. Her eyes were wide with fear, and she paled until I thought she’d pass out. We stared at each other, her lips slightly parted but no words came. Her eyes darted around, her breathing quickening, all the signs of her happiness gone.

Seconds ticked into minutes, the sounds of waves crashing against the shore so symbolically mirroring the increasingly crushed expression on her face.

Her son, how it grated me to even think of her having someone’s son, started crying, and it was what finally woke her from her stupor.

She quickly faced him and started cooing at him. “Shhh, it’s okay.”

Her eyes returned to me, watching me with a guarded expression. She picked up the boy off the ground and sat him on her hip.

“Don’t I even get a hello, wife?” I mocked her.

She pressed her lips into a thin line, her eyes turning darker. Her violet eyes were always her telltale. She couldn’t hide her emotions.

“Hello.” Even mad, her voice sounded soft. “Can it be a goodbye now too?”

I chuckled without amusement. “I don’t think so.”

She closed her eyes briefly, took a deep breath and then exhaled. As if she was desperately searching for an ounce of patience. “What do you want?”

“You are going back home with me.”

“No.”

I remembered the time when she was too scared to stand up to me. Yes, she bickered with me but never outright stood up to me. It was so different now. She dismissed my presence, turning her back to me and started walking away, pulling Ella along with her free hand.

Poor woman, she stood frozen, immobile, staring at us in shock.

Massimo and I followed behind. Grace’s steps away from us were rushed, but she couldn’t get away. Her son peeked over her shoulder at me and my breath stuck in my lungs. His big eyes stared at me curiously, and I resented him.

“Grace,” I started.

“Don’t talk to me,” she hissed.

“It’s time to go home.”

She whirled around. “You are taking me nowhere,” she spat her words. “I want you nowhere near me or my son. Do you understand?”

I grabbed her by her arm, my fingers digging into her flesh hard. I knew her fair skin complexion would bruise from my firm touch. I didn’t fucking care.

“You have no say in it, wife!” I smirked, my lips curving into a cruel smile and my voice cold. “You’ve played long enough.”

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Chapter Eight

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GRACE

My heart thundered wildly, blood rushing into my ears and my brain. I had to calm down so I could think clearly. I had never expected to see Luciano again. I never wanted to see him again.

Just like before, his eyes took my breath away. They were bewitching, and each time I gazed into them, oxygen would get caught in my lungs. Those eyes of rich, dark cognac mixed with colors of the forest. And those damn eyelashes, the envy of every woman. They were thick and black, surrounding those stunning eyes. Those eyes only gave a hint of the predator he was; a beast full of power and danger that could kiss you one second and snap your neck the next.

His hand firmly squeezed my arm in his grip, his inked fingers searing my skin.

“Let go of me,” I hissed, hating how his touch warmed my skin. I held on to my son, keeping him close to me. I didn’t want to alarm him. I wanted him to have a safe and happy life, full of joy not angry words. “And don’t ever touch me again.”

He lost that right a long time ago. And I would never give it to him again. I fell for him, and he broke my heart. Pulled a trigger. Like I was nobody, nothing. There was no forgiving that.

Surprisingly, Luciano’s hand fell down. I turned to Ella, and we shared a look. Yes, it shocked me to run into Luciano. I didn’t think we’d ever cross paths again, but we weren’t stupid. We always prepared for the worst. Every town we stayed at, we had a contingency plan.

“Take the baby,” I told Ella. Yes, calling Matteo who was almost three a baby was stretching it, but he’d always be my baby. “Go ahead towards the *house*.” I accented the last word and she knew what I meant. “I’ll be right behind you.”

I leaned over to give her my son. Swallowing hard, I murmured to him, “It’s okay, baby. Go with Ella. Mommy will be right behind you.”

“Gelato,” he pouted. “Mama, voglio gelato.” *Mama, I want ice cream.*

“Yes, in a minute.” The lie was bitter on my tongue. “Go with Ella, and then we’ll do that.”

He reluctantly let go, and I nodded to Ella. She started walking away from us, in the opposite direction of the ice cream shop, and I hoped my son wouldn’t decide today, of all days, to throw a tantrum.

I watched them go and then turned back to Luciano. *My husband*, I thought bitterly. There wasn’t a bigger regret in my life than him. My eyes traveled to Massimo. I couldn’t stand either one of them. If I never saw a single member of Luciano’s family, it would be too soon. Well, except Luciano’s father. He was always good to me and caring.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I told him, folding my arms over my chest.

My eyes studied my estranged husband. He was just as handsome as I remembered, the arrogance and ruthlessness written all over his features. His thick dark hair looked soft, just as I knew it was, and those smoldering hazel eyes could once upon a time make me weak in my knees. You’d think those eyes would clash against his tanned skin, but they draw you in even more.

There was a hint of ink above his crisp shirt collar, and I knew it snaked down his tanned chest, down his arms and over his hands. Those tattoos were equally beautiful and intimidating. For all intents and purposes, my husband was a gorgeous man. If only he wasn’t such an asshole.

He gave me one of those arrogant smiles, I hated so much. What I wouldn't give to slap that arrogant expression off his face and knee him in the family jewels and watch those lips curve into a painful grimace. Those lips were made for sinning, and he knew exactly how to use them. For good and evil.

“Oh, but I think you will come with me.” He sounded so damn sure of himself. I hated his guts.

“No, I won’t,” I replied. My voice sounded sure, but truthfully, I was anything but sure. “We have nothing to say to each other.”

He watched me pensively. “We have some business to finish up.”

I didn’t have a damn clue what he was talking about. I wanted nothing to do with him.

“You can come along to my place,” I answered him calmly, “and we can debate what it is that you think I’ll be doing. I assure you though, there is no business between you and I.

“But there is,” he had spoken calmly, the hint of threat in his voice. “Besides, you are my wife. Until that status is changed, you’ll do as I say.”

“You can hope, and while you are at it, please hold your breath,” I hissed. “I suggest you pay your driver, and we can debate how to end this at my place, one street over.”

We stared at each other, animosity in both of us. I hoped I hid it better than him, but I was pretty sure I was an open book. It was interesting how that battle of wills that started on the first day we met continued as if no years passed by.

We stood there, neither willing to budge, for what seemed like hours although it was mere seconds, maybe a minute tops. Finally, he nodded and turned to go to his car. Massimo glanced my way then went after Luciano, whispering something under his breath. I didn’t give a shit what they were saying, I watched, waited till they were far enough to give me some headway. I thanked God and all the saints that I decided to wear my white chucks instead of sandals.

I turned on my heel and started running.

“Son of a bitch,” I heard my husband yell behind me. “Grace!”

I continued running, not bothering to glance back. I couldn’t afford to lose a single second. I heard them in the distance, but I was at an advantage. I turned left that would take me to my house but knowing those two, they probably already knew where we lived. Right after taking the left, I took the first alley and a shortcut to get to the street parallel to this one.

Once I was there, I kept running, looking for a cab. I flagged a driver and jumped in.

“Ferry. Veloce.” *Fast.*

He nodded and rushed through the streets. My phone beeped, and I glanced at it.

Made it.

Relief washed over me, giving me extra hope.

I kept glancing over the familiar streets for the two unwelcome figures, but I never saw them. I hoped we wouldn't see them again.

Ten minutes later we were at the ferry, and I gave the driver a fifty dollar euro then jumped out of the cab and ran towards the ferry. My eyes scouted for the two familiar faces, and the moment I spotted them, I rushed towards them.

"You made it," Ella murmured relieved. Her face was pale, her lip trembling. I took my son, Matteo, into my arms, placing gentle kisses on his forehead.

"Yes, we need to catch the first flight out of this country." I hated leaving and starting all over but we had no choice. It made me resent my husband even more. Why couldn't he have just stayed in his stupid world and ruled his cursed empire? Instead, he had to destroy everything in his path.

"Mamma," Matteo called out to me.

I took his small hand into mine, and I placed a kiss on the palm of his little hand. I would never allow Matteo to be touched by that world.

"Shhh."

Bitterness swelled inside me. Now, we had to uproot Matteo and start a whole new life. I loved our life on this little island with people that acted like family.

"We need to get to Palermo International Airport. All our emergency travel documents and travel bags are kept there." She knew that too. Thankfully, we could access our money from anywhere in the world. We wouldn't go hungry without money, food or a way to afford a shelter. Right now, we just had to get out of here.

Ella nodded. It tore at my insides to drag us to another start. "Ella, are you sure you want to come along? You'll be safer if you stay behind."

"No." Her answer was firm, the determination written all over her face. "We stick together. We do this together."

I exhaled a breath I didn't know I was holding. I wouldn't have blamed her if she wanted to stay behind, but it felt good having her by my side.

"Thank you," I muttered. She had been more than a family for as long as we've known each other.

We stood on the deck of the ferry, watching the island that was our home for the past year get smaller and smaller. This place has been our

longest residency since we left the States. The wind swept through the upper deck, blowing our hair wildly and along with it our little happy life.

“Do you think this will work?” Ella kept glancing around. She was scared just as much as I was. If Luciano dragged us back home, we’d be doomed. We escaped our fates once, I wasn’t sure if we’d succeed again.

Despite my worries, I nodded in answer, words stuck in my throat. It had to work.

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Chapter Nine

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LUCIANO

I had to admire my wife's resourcefulness. I couldn't remember the last time someone slipped through my fingers and got this far. Oh wait, yes, I could. It was my wife then too! The last time she disappeared, her family smuggled her out of the country without a trace. She vanished right out from under my nose.

I had to get my connection in the police to get me off the island and have them follow her discreetly from the moment she stepped foot off that ferry. One thing Grace didn't know was that I had connections to pretty much all the authorities in Sicily. I watched her with passport in hand and a carry-on bag, her son in her arms. Her friend had a carry-on bag too. I was curious to know where they kept their stuff since they never went back to their house. I couldn't help but be a little impressed. My wife was prepared in the event I ever found her. She had come a long way from being my naive, trusting wife.

However, I wouldn't repeat the mistake and let her slip through my fingers. If I have to chain her to me, I would. Or even better, maybe her son. Because I knew without a doubt, she would never leave without him. He would be my leverage.

"Your plane is ready, Mr. Vitale."

"Good." I headed towards my wife, with Massimo and Mario, one of my local bodyguards, and two police officers. She was ready to board a plane for South Africa.

Fucking South Africa!

What did she think she'd do in South Africa?

Yeah, never gonna happen.

I strode towards her, coming up right behind her. Even now, I admired her graceful back as she held her son in her arms.

“Going somewhere, wife?” I asked her, in a mocking tone, towering right behind her.

She jumped, a startled whimper leaving her mouth. She turned around to face me, her son wrapped in her arms watching back and forth between his mother and me. I watched her face pale a few shades again, her eyes filled with terror and surprise. It seemed to be her only response to me. She feared me, as she should.

I should have felt regret, sorrow, but I didn’t. I felt nothing but satisfaction that I got her. She was going to fucking leave me, like dust, behind her. Without a backward glance. Now that I had her, she wouldn’t have a chance to escape. She’d be under my clutches till I was done with her.

“My plane is ready,” I told her, my voice cold and unwavering. “You will be boarding with us.”

“No.” That was twice in a day she refused me.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“I’ll make a scene,” she threatened, her eyes darting around the airport.

“You can, but it won’t matter,” I warned her. “The police here work for me. Make a scene, and I’ll throw you over my shoulder then carry you into my plane. Or even better, I’ll take your kid and leave you behind.”

She knew I was serious. I wasn’t in the habit of making empty threats.

“We don’t want to go anywhere with you,” she hissed.

“I don’t give a shit about what you three want. But I know you are coming with me. Or maybe I’ll drag your kid with me and allow you to follow like a dog.”

Her eyes flashed in anger and hate. “Asshole,” she muttered.

I watched her weigh all her possibilities, her facial expression changing. The moment she resigned herself to the realization she had no other choice, I could see it in her eyes. I smirked; it took her long enough. But resignation wasn’t the only thing lingering in her violet gaze; there was fury and detest in there too.

Pure hate. I would know; after all I was intimately familiar with the feeling.

“Fine,” she spat out. She shared a glance with Ella, then a quick nod by my wife. Those two would give us problems; I had no doubt about it. “But Ella stays with us the entire time. Even when we get back to the States.”

I should tell her no. She doesn’t get to set rules. I wanted to punish her; make her regret ever going against me.

“If not, you might as well kill us all now,” my wife added in a false bravado. There was a hint of fear in it but also something telling me she meant it.

“Fine, she can stay with us.” Fuck, did those words just leave my mouth? She’d always had this effect on me; made me want to do right by her. Till she burned me and stabbed me in the back.

“Thank you.” Her gratitude surprised me. I didn’t expect it, probably didn’t deserve it either. Her voice was small, and she tore her gaze away from me and gave her friend a small nod in a silent agreement.

I could always take the offer back, I assured myself. It wasn’t as if I owed my wife anything.

We strode towards the gate that would take us outside and to my own private plane. Mario led the way, the two women after him with Massimo and I following behind. I wouldn’t risk her escaping again.

I watched my wife’s rigid back as she walked in front of me. Her son kept peeking over her shoulder at me. He didn’t look anything like his mother. He babbled something to his mother and Grace’s posture immediately changed.

“In a little bit,” she murmured softly to his unknown question. The loud engine of the airplanes was the only noise surrounding us while we walked towards the steps of my plane, *Vitale Enterprise.*

My wife’s step faltered and she stopped right before taking the first step. I saw desperation and tears glistening in her breathtaking eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Always so stubborn. Ella was half way up. Seeing Grace falter, she paused too. The two friends locked their eyes, unspoken words but understanding in them.

She turned to face me. “Why do we need to come?”

I jerked my head at Massimo to let him know to keep on going. I could handle my wife. He climbed up the stairs and nudged her friend into the plane.

“First, because you are my wife,” I told her.

“I want a divorce,” she cut me off. I ground my molars to keep my cool. “Leave us here. I know you said divorce doesn’t happen in your world. But annulment does.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I need something from you first.” *I need to fuck you out of my system and bring down your entire family.* I kept those words wisely to myself. “And in order to get an annulment, your physical presence is needed in the U.S.”

Fuck, I hoped that was true. I was making shit up as I went. Her eyebrows scrunched as she processed my words.

“All our possessions are here,” she muttered. “All my son’s toys. Everything.” We locked gazes. “You could leave us so we can at least pack properly.”

God, she really thought I was an idiot. She’d disappear, and it would take me another three years to find her. If I was lucky.

“No. I already have one of my local men packing up your stuff. It should be right behind us.”

She let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’ll give you whatever you want.” My cock stirred to life at her offer to give me whatever I wanted. If she only knew! “I’ll sign any paperwork, tell you anything. Please, Luciano. Leave us here.”

“You are starting to piss me off, Grace,” I gritted instead. She was so good at tearing down my control. I was half tempted to bend her over, right here and fuck her. But her son was in her arms. Fuck! “Get on the plane.”

“Aereo, Mamma,” her son babbled.

She took a deep, resigned breath. “Yep, plane.” I placed my hand on her lower back and nudged her up the stairs. She quickly smacked my hand away. “I got it, thank you.”

Lovely, she couldn’t even stand my touch, and I was ready to pounce on her. Years of jerking off with only images of my wife to help me find release finally caught up to me. This homecoming was worse than I could have imagined.

The second she entered the cabin, Ella quickly stood up and headed her way. “Are you okay?”

Grace nodded, her lips pressed tightly together. If looks could kill, my dear wife would have had me dead already.

“Hello, Mr. Vitale,” the stewardess greeted us. “Would you and your guests like some drinks?”

“Yes, thank you. The usual.” I would need to get drunk to survive this transatlantic flight with my wife on board. Otherwise, I might drag her into the back of the plane by her hair and fuck her senseless.

“And you ladies?” she asked our guests.

Grace and Ella just shook their heads.

“And who are you?” The stewardess cooed Grace’s son. “Would you like some milk or juice?”

The boy looked from the stewardess to his mother, questioning in his eyes.

“Whichever you want, Matteo,” she murmured.

I covered my surprise. Matteo was my father’s name. Not that she called my father by his first name. Initially she kept calling him Mr. Vitale and gradually changed it to Dad. It must be a coincidence. Matteo was a very common name in Italy. Was that the name of the boy’s father?

“Succo,” Matteo answered the stewardess. She looked in confusion at Grace and then me.

“He’ll have juice,” I told her.

Grace turned her back to me, then headed with Ella and her son to the furthest corner of the plane and sat themselves there. Massimo and I shared a look. It didn’t matter. It wasn’t as if they could run anywhere, unless they planned to jump out of the plane.

The stewardess was back with all our drinks.

“I brought you two ladies some water, just in case,” she told Grace and Ella.

“Thanks,” they both murmured, taking the bottled water.

I couldn’t help but watch my wife. She seemed different somehow. More confident, stronger, more beautiful. Although that hair would have to go. I loved her natural hair color. Not that it should matter to me at all.

The moment she had another man’s child, our marriage was history.

No, the moment you pulled the trigger, your marriage was history.

I shoved my conscience away. I didn’t need it, didn’t want it. She wanted an annulment. I should want it too. She meant nothing to me. Then why did it bother me to think of her marrying someone else? It would be the only reason she would want a divorce or annulment. The whole marriage with her started wrong, the means for revenge against her family.

And that need for revenge wasn’t gone. I would use her, for revenge and to drag her back into my bed. I had to get her out of my system somehow.

I watched her with her son as the plane ascended into the air, murmuring soft words to him I couldn’t hear. I recalled how she insisted on not having kids during those short months we were married. She certainly didn’t mind having a child with another man right away. I wanted to hunt him down and slice his throat for daring to touch something that wasn’t his. Fuck, I wanted to torture the man, nice and long, and see light extinguish from his eyes for ever seeing my woman flush with orgasm. The bitterness in my veins was like poison.

Her fingers stroke her son’s hair softly, her whispers soft. I watched the boy’s eyes droop and the moment we were up in the air, he fell asleep, his head on his mother’s lap.

I turned my gaze away, grinding my teeth. Instead, I caught Massimo watching Gabriella. He had a crush on her before they disappeared. I imagined he probably still did.

Yeah, good luck with that.

I would have to assign Roberto to keep an eye on the women, although that didn’t sit well with me either. Grace was a beautiful woman, and Roberto didn’t have a woman. He knew if he even thought of touching her, he’d be a dead man.

I trusted Massimo unconditionally. He was family, a true blood relative. But he would think with his dick. So would I. We needed someone with no skin in the game to keep an eye on them, so they wouldn’t slip through our fingers again.

Although I refused to look my wife’s way for the rest of the trip, I sensed her the entire time. I could hear the two of them speaking in hushed voices, and I had no doubt they were planning an escape.

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Chapter Ten

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GRACE

I sensed Luciano's eyes on me, but I worked hard to ignore him. Even when he wasn't looking at us, I knew he kept watch. He said he needed something from me. I wondered what it was. One thing I knew for sure. I was sick and tired of being a pawn in everyone's struggle for power. By pulling Ella, Matteo, and I back into his world, he put our lives in danger. It made me hate him even more.

"Do you think it was my email with a photo that gave us away?" Ella murmured under her breath.

I wondered how he found us too. We were so careful. Just a few days ago, I thought about him and here he was. Maybe it was my warning, and I ignored it. Didn't I feel like someone was watching me the other day at the market? Now I knew for sure someone did. I should have packed us up and made us move that day. Instead, I ignored my instinct.

God, I hope we get out of this alive.

Finally, I shrugged my shoulders. I didn't want Ella beating herself up about this.

"I don't think so. It doesn't really matter," we both spoke in whispers. "We'll just keep out of his way. He said he needed something from me, and in order to get an annulment, I had to be in the States."

Emma's mouth just about dropped. "He'll give it to you?"

"I guess he wants it too. I don't really care, as long as I get it."

"What do you think he wants?"

I wished I knew. Not knowing made me anxious and blind. I couldn't afford to be blind when it came to Luciano nor anyone else.

“What about your family?”

That was my biggest fear. Yes, I feared Luciano, but I feared my family more. “I need a plan to get us out of Luciano’s clutches and to keep Matteo off my family’s radar.”

“How?”

I brushed my fingers across his forehead, moving the little strands of hair out of his face.

“I don’t know.”

“Should we tell him?”

I knew what she was asking. If I told Luciano that Matteo was his, he’d protect him. But I was scared of losing my son. I couldn’t lose him. He was my everything. I wished I knew what the right thing to do was. I wanted to keep my son protected and with me at all costs. Did that make me selfish?

Maybe. But I needed my son; he was my reason for fighting to survive. Besides, Luciano hated the Romano blood so much, I kept telling myself not to entrust my son to him.

“Not yet,” I murmured. “I just need a plan.”

By dragging us back to the States, Luciano was putting us all right back in the middle of the war between his family and mine. I refused to allow my son and my best friend to be pawns. Nobody would use us ever again. As far as I was concerned, they could all kill each other. I couldn’t care less. *Well, except his dad.*

Although his father hated my family too. But he never transferred that hate to me. If anything, he was extra nice. I never understood why Luciano hated my family so much. I gathered they did something to him, but I could never get an answer. I figured it must be about money. That was all that mattered to my grandmother and my uncle. And God knew, Luciano did some horrible shit for money. I saw it firsthand. Drug trafficking and money laundering. Why did he need it when he was rich as fuck? Between him and Cassio King, they owned most of the real estate in New York. Luciano owned casinos in New Jersey and Connecticut too. Wasn’t that enough?

I raised my eyes, risking a glance at my husband. Our gazes met and shudders ran through my body.

It’s just disgust, I lied to myself.

God, I hated him. I hated everything about him.

We landed at JFK International, and I debated if somehow, I could alert security or the border patrol to help us and get us out of my husband's clutches. We exited the plane and Luciano already had extra men waiting for us, along with his armored vehicles.

If he wouldn't work with criminals, he wouldn't need this shit.

But I kept those thoughts to myself. I glanced around, hoping someone would come and take our passports. Ella's, Matteo's, and my traveling documents were falsified. We left the country with fake documentation too, but we discarded them the first chance we had in Europe. Our first purchase in Europe was new identities. When I gave birth to Matteo in Northern Italy on the military base, I used my real name, so I could ensure there was a record of my son. But I already had a new identity established for him too so when Ella snuck me out of the hospital two hours after giving birth, we were on our way to Portugal. We stuck to EU countries, to ensure we moved under the radar.

Crossing borders was always my biggest fear. Yes, we invested a lot of money into our new identification, but neither Ella nor I were experts. I couldn't tell the difference between a good fake travel document and a bad one.

But I should have known that Luciano would bribe whoever so we'd never have to go through any security or border patrol.

"Oh, wife, you look so disappointed," he taunted me as we all crammed into a large vehicle, his guards packing two vehicles in front of us and behind us. He probably knew exactly what I hoped for. "There will be nobody to check your travel documents. Don't worry, I wouldn't let my wife get put in federal prison for traveling on falsified documentation."

"Ex-wife," I barely choked out.

"Not yet." His cold gaze was on me, chilling me to the bone. And the smile on those sinful lips was cruel. Still that sweet spot between my thighs throbbed. I tried to justify to myself it was deprivation. My body would react like this to any man. The last time I had sex was with him, the day he pressed his gun onto my temple. It was only natural that my body finally wanted a release. Though I suspected I was lying to myself.

Maybe I am just plain stupid. Only a stupid woman would feel any fucking tingling on her pussy at seeing a man that played Russian Roulette with a gun against her skull.

There was nothing natural about this. My body should be repulsed by him. He put a fucking gun to my forehead and would have killed me. He pulled the trigger, and the only reason I lived was because of some sheer, dumb luck.

I fucking hated him. My husband, my uncle, and my grandmother were all competing for the first spot on my hate list. I should kill all three of them. At least, I was smart enough to learn some defense skills over the last few years. And I learned how to use a gun.

Maybe it will come in handy, I thought to myself. And I could rid this world of three parasites. But even as I thought that, I knew having Luciano's blood on my hands would shatter me. I could never look my son in the eyes, if I murdered his father. Regardless if he deserved it or not.

I hate his guts.

"Mamma, ho fame." Matteo's voice pulled me from my hate tantrum. I blinked my eyes, looking at my son.

"What?"

"Ho fame," he whined. I glanced at Ella in exasperation, but I knew she didn't understand him either. I had to learn Italian. *What kind of mother doesn't understand her son?*

"Matteo, in English please."

I felt like shit asking him to say it in English. I should know my son.

"He's hungry." Luciano chimed in, and the fact he could understand my son and I couldn't, made me hate him more.

I dug through my bag but before I could pull out a snack for him, Luciano handed Matteo a Kinder Bueno. My son's eyes got big, and before I could even open my mouth to reprimand Luciano for giving a kid chocolate to sate his hunger, Matteo was tearing into it, struggling to open it. His eyes met mine, begging me to open it.

I took it with a sigh and opened it for him.

"Just one bar," I told him. "We'll have lunch or dinner once we get to our pris-" I cut my word off. I almost said to our *prison* but that would be cruel. I didn't want to put Matteo in the middle of my disagreements with Luciano. "To our destination," I murmured.

I refused to say home. That was not our home.

"Grazie," Matteo told Luciano and pride swelled inside me. My son will grow up to be a good man. We'd start with his manners and end with his compassion.

“Prego,” Luciano answered him. I pulled my phone out and instantly downloaded Rosetta Stone. There was no chance in hell I would ever not understand what my son was saying.

“Get me one too,” Ella muttered under her breath, her eyes on my phone. I nodded, and once I purchased for both of us, I started the download process. I would learn perfect Italian, if it was the last thing that I did.

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Chapter Eleven

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LUCIANO

I watched Matteo devour the chocolate and held back my grin. Grace's attention was on her phone, and I could see the reflection of it in the car window. She was downloading the Rosetta Stone app. It bothered her that I could understand her son and she couldn't. The frustration was written all over her face. She was so focused on Rosetta Stone, she missed Matteo glancing his mother's way before he devoured the second chocolate bar. It wasn't pure chocolate anyhow. It was more cookie crumbs wrapped in chocolate.

His eyes traveled my way and realizing he had been caught, regret entered his eyes. I winked at him, trying to assure him his secret was safe. A smile spread over his face, and suddenly jealousy hit me. Matteo didn't look like his mother, but he had her smile. It lit up his whole face.

Something in my chest shifted, cracking the hard ice my heart had become. I decidedly shut it down. It was nothing; I certainly wasn't turning soft for a boy that wasn't mine. He was just a kid, and I happened to grab the snack on my way out of the plane. The kid slept the entire fight, so I grabbed it because I wanted to make sure I didn't have a screaming kid in the car during our two hour drive.

Glancing in his mother's direction, I watched the reflection in the glass as she shifted from her language app to her emails. She didn't know that Massimo had put a trace on her and Ella's phones. When we went through security in the airport, her and Ella's electronics were given to Massimo by the guard. It took him all of two minutes to add a tracing bug while Ella and

Grace were being patted down to ensure they had no weapons on them. We would see everything they do on their devices, and who they talk to.

My lip tilted up remembering how Grace spat at the security guard. "*My ex-husband is a criminal, not me.*" She was pissed off they pulled her and Ella out of the line to check.

Grace lifted her eyes and smiled softly the moment she saw her son's face. "Oh, Matteo. Your face has chocolate smeared all over it."

The boy grinned, showing off his teeth stained with chocolate. Massimo chuckled next to me. Truthfully, I would have laughed too if not for Grace's constant glaring my way. She pulled out a baby wipe and cleaned out his face while he kept trying to avoid it by shifting his face left and right.

"Did you know your uncle petitioned to have all your assets transferred to him?"

Her movements paused and she stiffened at the question, but I didn't care. There was no time to waste. I would start digging till I got all my answers. Her lips pressed tight, and there was no doubt in my mind that she knew.

I waited for her answer, the tension thick in the car. The vehicle could easily transport ten people, but right now, it felt too small for the five of us. Foolishly, I wished it was only Grace and I. If it was just the two of us, I'd get an answer out of her. I remembered how she caved when I touched her, her body melting under my fingertips.

"Yes." Her admission surprised me. Hell, the fact that she answered at all surprised me.

"Did you ask him to do that?"

Her eyes went to her friend and then returned back to me. "No."

"Was he going to split it with you?"

Something crossed her face, it almost looked like fear, but she quickly composed herself.

"Luciano, keep my son and me out of your damn games with my family," she hissed in a low voice. "Whatever is going on, I am not interested to be part of it."

"You are Romano," I told her with a smirk. "You have always been part of it."

The loathing in her stunning eyes should feel like a victory. A twisted, bitter victory. She sat stiffly, her hands clenching in her lap. She didn't even

try to hide her contempt for me. I trapped her, and there was nowhere for her to go.

Let her hate me, I thought to myself. *I don't care.*

She'd serve my purpose; once and for all, I'd get this woman out of my system and out of my head. If she was financing her uncle's activities, I'd have her broke before the week was out. There was no room for her in my life. I'd take what I want and then send her on her way.

She can run back to her man, I thought bitterly. But I knew it was a lie. I'd never let her go to another man. The only way out was death.

"Mamma," her son called out to her. As she glanced at Matteo, her features instantly softened.

"Yes, baby?"

"Bene?"

That kid worshiped his mother. For all I knew, he was still in diapers, yet he was already worried about his mother.

"Yes." She pulled him into her arms and pressed a kiss against his forehead.

For the rest of the trip, she ignored me.

While she stared out of the window, stubbornly, I couldn't help but admire her graceful pale neck. The last time we drove together, I couldn't keep my mouth off her neck, nibbling and licking her soft skin. I wondered if she still tasted the same. My eyes roamed over her face, and I noticed exhaustion written all over it. While her son slept during our flight, she didn't. Even Ella fell asleep, but Grace remained awake. As if she kept watch, which was ridiculous. Did she think I was going to throw them all out of the plane?

She probably did think that, considering how we parted ways. But what did she expect? Her family killed my mother and sister. There was no way she didn't know what her uncle and grandmother had done to them, cornered them and killed them execution style in front of my father's eyes. Even knowing what her family had done, Grace betrayed me by telling her family about my shipment. I just started to trust her, and she betrayed me at the first opportunity.

My father suggested that she might have been scared of her family and was forced to betray me. But if that was the case, why didn't she just tell me? She knew I was stronger than her family. I would have protected her. Her family couldn't hurt her while she was with me.

No, I didn’t believe she was forced at all.

We approached my property, and I sensed more than saw Grace tense. In fact, she was so tense, I feared she’d snap in half. The moment the car came to a halt, my father was at the entrance, eagerness and restlessness all over him.

I exited the car and extended my hand to help my wife who held onto her son for dear life. She ignored my hand and exited.

“Gracy, sei venuta.” It was hard to miss the happiness in my father’s voice. He gave me a nod, his face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Mia cara.”

I watched my wife in shock and disbelief. Her eyes glimmered and her lower lip trembled, as if she would burst into tears at any moment. She would have been perfectly happy to kill me and not look back, but emotions reflected in her eyes as she looked at my father.

“Hello, Mr. Vitale.” Her voice shook as she greeted him.

“No, no.” I stared at my father who beamed excitedly and suddenly shed five years off his features. “No Mr. Vitale. Dad, sì?”

She gave him her soft smile and nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears. I loved my father, he was my idol. He taught me everything. But at this very moment, the jealousy and envy ate at me. My wife paled and ran the moment she saw me. But she smiled softly and sincerely at my father.

“Sì, sì. Dad.” Matteo broke the moment, and it seemed my father only now noticed that Grace held a child.

“Chi è questo?” My father asked, his gaze on the boy. He would finally realize Grace was not part of this family. She was Romano. “Who is this?” he asked in English.

“Um, this is my son,” Grace murmured softly. My father gave her an odd look and then his attention returned to Matteo. He reached his hand and he gently took his chubby cheeks between his thumb and index finger, making him laugh. He used to do the same to me when I was a kid. “Matteo.”

His eyes snapped to Grace, and I didn’t have to guess what crossed his mind.

“It’s just a coincidence,” I told him in Italian. I didn’t want my father to draw the wrong conclusion. He didn’t need that hope in his old age when it would only get crushed sooner or later. But my father just ignored me and grinned at her.

“Ahhh, little Matteo,” he spoke softly. “You call me Nonno.”

I groaned inwardly. There would be no dissuading my father from allowing the boy to call him Nonno now. Grace barely stepped foot onto my property, and she was already conquering hearts. Damn it, I didn’t need this right now. I needed to use her to bring down her family and get her into my bed till I had my fill of her.

He wrapped Grace and Matteo into a hug. “Welcome home,” he murmured softly, placing a kiss on the boy's forehead.

The boy grinned and rambled something that sounded half Italian, half English.

My father chuckled softly. “Sì, Matteo. We have a beach and a pool.”

“Um, he can’t swim yet,” Grace muttered. “Ah, Mr-... Nonno, this is Ella. Not sure if you remember her. She’ll be staying with me.”

He remembered her. My father never forgot a face.

“Hello.” Ella looked just as happy to be here as much as Grace.

He smiled. “Hello Gabriella. Grazie for watching over Matteo and Grace.”

She smiled uncomfortably. “I think it was the other way around,” she muttered.

Grace pulled her into a hug. “We had each other’s back. We watched each other.”

They shared a smile before Ella’s eyes darted to Massimo, a blush coloring her cheeks. *She likes him,* I realized smugly. And with that realization, a plan formed in my fucked up brain. I knew there was no chance in hell Grace would ever share what happened since those two left the country, but I wondered if Ella would be an easier shell to crack.

“You must be tired,” my father fussed over the women and Matteo. “But first we eat.”

“Thank you.”

All of them headed into the house, while Massimo and I lingered behind. The moment they were out of earshot, I turned to Massimo.

“See if you can get any information out of her friend,” I instructed. “I want to know what they did for the past three years.”

“What the fuck, Luciano? You want me to torture her?”

“No.” After all, I wasn’t that cruel yet. “Seduce her.”

That shouldn't be too hard of a task. She liked him, and he obviously liked her too. Without another word, that conversation was over. Massimo didn’t need detailed instructions.

I was tired as fuck, but we needed an update on what happened over the last few days. Both of us headed into my office, and I dialed up Cassio.

“Luciano, you bastard,” he greeted me, his voice booming through the speaker. “You’re back. Is Massimo back too?”

“Yes, we are both here.”

A moment of silence and an exhale. “Okay, are you going to tell me whether or not you found your wife?”

“I did, and she’s back here.”

“Hmm.” He cleared his throat, covering his surprise. “She came willingly?”

“No.”

“Is she working with Alphonso?”

God, I fucking hated even thinking that she might be working with Alphonso.

“I don’t know,” I gritted. “She isn’t exactly cooperating. Or talking much.”

“We’ll need to keep an eye on everything she does.”

“Cassio, she is my wife, and none of your fucking concern.” I tried hard to keep my calm. Just the thought of any other man around my wife or even concerning himself with her, was enough to send me into a rage. “I have a tracker on both her and her friend’s phone. I will handle my wife, my way.”

Silence followed. I didn’t give a fuck if Cassio liked it or not. It wasn’t up for discussion. Yes, I banked on him needing me, but even if he didn’t, nobody was to touch my wife.

“Okay, we’ll do this your way. You’ll keep me informed. Yeah?”

Anyone else, Cassio would have killed them for telling him off like that. The fact he let it slide for me said a lot. It was at this precise moment that I knew we would always have each other’s back. No doubts, no questions asked.

“Yes.”

“Is she okay?” There was nothing but concern in his voice. “More importantly, are you?”

“She has a kid,” I grumbled. “Anyhow, tell us what we missed?”

A heartbeat of dead silence and then he answered, changing the subject. After all, what was there to say about it!

“Well, while you two were strutting through Europe,” he said teasingly, trying to lighten the mood. Massimo and I rolled our eyes at the same

moment. “Alphonso and my father struck a deal. Romano is playing the Columbians. He and my father plan on ripping Raphael off the moment Alphonso receives the goods. So they get free shipments of women and drugs, and keep all the money.”

“Do the Columbians know?” I didn’t want to see anything happen to Raphael and his men. Yes, we were all criminals, but Raphael was like us. He stuck to drugs and arms smuggling, staying clear off human trafficking. If something was to happen to him, the next guy that stepped into his spot might not be so *honorable.* Yes, Raphael’s father was a bastard but so was Cassio’s. We were our own men, not our father’s men. Luckily, my father was a great man but not all of us were lucky like that.

“Yes, I alerted them.”

“Anything else?”

“There is something else, but we don’t have any details yet.” Cassio didn’t seem happy about it. He was very much like me in that regard. He hated waiting on information. “Luca hacked into our father’s email and found correspondence with Alphonso referencing an old agreement between my father and the Romano family. There isn’t much more than that. We still have some digging to do before we know exactly what it is, but I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“Have you run it by Nico?”

There wasn’t a man walking this Earth that was more coolheaded than Nico. And he had an unkeen way of digging up the past. Probably all his vast contacts in every known, and unknown, agency on this damn planet. It was the reason he made a good advisor. The man was a human machine.

“Yes. He mentioned an old standing agreement between the Romano and King family that traded women of high social circles to high ranking members of the mafia. And he seems to think this agreement wasn’t only with the Romano family. He’s chasing it down.”

“You are kidding me?” It certainly sounded like a bad joke. “Like a matchmaking service for mobsters or some shit?”

“Fuck if I know. My bastard father and his ancestors kept a tight lid on it. There are only a few people that even know about it. Personally, I think it is some made up garbage.”

I didn’t point out to Cassio that his father’s ancestors were his as well. He hated his father’s guts and anything related to his father. I didn’t blame him. That man was a monster. Cassio and Luca were his sons, but he

mistreated them, like they were disposable commodities. It was the reason Cassio and Luca only associated with their mother's side of the family. Marco King, their half-brother, was no better than Benito King. He was younger than Cassio and Luca but he was a cruel asshole that enjoyed inflicting pain. Just like their father. Marco's mother was no better. Some airheaded, gold digging, blonde bimbo that insisted she was a natural redhead. The whole world knew she wasn't. It was probably the reason Marco King was obsessed with redheads. Something definitely wrong with that one.

"Matchmaking for mobsters," I muttered. "Now there is something I have never encountered."

"You and me both."

We worked through a few more outstanding items. I would have to get in contact with Ghost soon and schedule the next three dates I would require services. That actually improved my mood slightly. For some reason, I liked corresponding with Ghost. I found the humor that shone through those short messages entertained me.

THE NEXT MORNING WHEN I WOKE UP, I FELT AT PEACE FOR THE FIRST TIME in over three years. I checked my phone to see if Grace or Ella had reached out to anyone. Nothing, not a single email or text went out. I logged into the security system and accessed the cameras in her son's room. By the time I was done with meetings and handling all the business I had missed over the last few days, Grace had already gone to bed, along with her son.

The room I designated for Matteo came up on my phone screen, and I found Grace's sleeping form. Her brown colored hair spread across the pillow, making her skin appear even paler than it really was. I fucking hated that hair color. She still looked beautiful, but something about those ginger red curls matched her personality to a tee.

It took me a few seconds to realize something wasn't right. Where was Matteo? I checked different angles of the room to ensure I covered the entire room. He wasn't there. Abruptly, I jolted out of the bed, put my pants on and rushed out of the room shirtless.

That's when I heard it. The soft giggle of a child.

I followed the sound and found Matteo in the kitchen, sitting in a highchair. My father fed him brioche con gelato. A sweet roll filled with ice cream, a summer Sicilian breakfast. Neither one of them noticed me, and I listened to my father speak to Matteo in Sicilian dialect about things they would do today. Matteo grinned, which told me he understood him perfectly. This boy already captured my father's heart.

"Come in and sit with us, Luciano," my father said without lifting his head. "Have breakfast."

I sat down next to the boy, his beaming smile contagious. "You like that breakfast, huh?"

He nodded his head eagerly. "Sì. Più, per favore." More, please. There was a smudge of ice cream on his cheek.

I chuckled. "I think one brioche is quite enough," I told him, smiling. "Your mother won't be happy about feeding you gelato for breakfast."

He took my hand and held it as he finished the last bite of his breakfast. My eyes lowered to his small, chubby hand in my large, rough palm. His hand barely covered a quarter of mine. Fuck, my chest hurt again. At this rate, I'd get a heart attack soon.

He cooed some more unrecognizable words and I smiled. "I guess so, buddy. I didn't pick up on that."

"Spiaggia," he babbled.

"He is quite adamant about going to the beach," my father spoke softly, a smile I haven't seen on his face in a long time playing around his lips.

"Ah, Luciano." Our cook strode into the kitchen. "Coffee?"

"Sure, thank you," I told her. "And can I have one of those brioche, please?"

Surprise flashed across her face, but she quickly recovered and brought me a plate.

Massimo strolled in at that moment. "I want one too, please."

He sat down next to my father. "Buon giorno."

"Buon giorno, Massimo." My cousin was the closest thing I ever had to a brother. His mother was my father's sister, and he practically grew up with my sister and I.

Maria placed brioche in front of Massimo. "Make sure you eat it all, boys." She loved feeding us.

"Aren't you too old for brioche?" I joked, poking at Massimo.

“You can never be too old for that,” he murmured, biting into his breakfast. “Besides, aren’t you?

“No, I’m not,” I answered him.

“Damn, I forgot how good they are. Right, Matteo?” Massimo looked at the little boy and the latter nodded in agreement.

I smiled, shaking my head at him. Strangely this moment felt almost like the old days, before life became a clusterfuck. Before my mother and sister were killed by the Romano, changing all our lives forever.

“How about we share this one, Matteo?” I asked the little guy next to me who watched us all with wonder in his eyes. At the offer his big eyes sparkled like I just offered him the world. I let him take a bite and returned my gaze to my father.

“Should I take him to the beach?” My father asked.

“Grace said he can’t swim yet. Probably better if you don’t go down there alone.”

He nodded. “He seems to love the beach.”

Considering where we found them hiding, I was sure he was right. “Boy probably spent every day at the beach, and now he’s missing it.”

“Where did you find her?” My father asked.

There was no question about who we were talking about. “Favignana.”

“Your mother’s hometown?” Surprised etched on his face while I nodded in confirmation. I didn’t think it was a coincidence. Grace spent quite a bit of time talking with my father during our short marriage. He often spoke of his time in his hometown and my mother. “Was Matteo born there?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know.” He watched me pensively, and I wondered what went through his mind. Usually, my father and I were in sync, but when it came to Grace, our wires always got crossed.

“Lei resta qui. Davvero, mio figlio?” *She will stay here. True, my son?* Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised that my father still wanted Grace to remain. I thought she’d fall out of his graces, but my father had a permanent soft spot for my wife. And now her son.

“Più.” The little boy demanded, giving me time to answer my father. He was certainly bossy. He opened his mouth and waited for his brioche. Hopefully we finish this breakfast before Grace wakes up. Content he got his food, Matteo reached over closer to me, and I watched, curious what he was doing.

“Ouch.” Little schmuck pulled my nipple.

The kid gave me a grin and murmured, “Latte.”

My father burst into booming laughter, shortly followed by Massimo and Maria. I grinned too, hearing my father laugh making me happy.

“Sorry, buddy,” I told Matteo. “I don’t have any of that shit there. But Maria will get your milk from the refrigerator.”

She was already pouring milk into a plastic sippy cup. I could see her back shaking with the laughter she was trying to hold back. Glad someone was having fun at my expense. Anywhere else, I’d shoot the fuckers down. But I guess I’d allow it in the kitchen.

She brought milk over to him.

“Here you go, little guy.” She placed the sippy cup in front of him. It would seem it didn’t take her long to buy all the stuff a kid needs.

“Grazie.” I had to give it to Grace, the boy had manners.

“Maria, thank you for getting all the stuff we need for Matteo.”

“No problem. It is nice having little ones in the house again.”

I flinched. Maria has been with us since my sister and I were children. Glancing at my father, I didn’t see the usual soul shattering sorrow on his face. Instead, there was hope edged in his wrinkles.

“Yes, she will stay, Dad,” I answered my father’s earlier question in Italian. I didn’t know how I would keep Grace with us, but I’d find a way. If I had to chain her to this house, I’d ensure she remained in this household for as long as my father lived. And if I had to get rid of Matteo’s father... Fuck it, I would. Everybody had a price.

The next few minutes we all sat in silence. Matteo drank his milk, his eyes slightly droopy, like he was getting tired. His fingers wrapped around my finger, his hand resting against the palm of my hand. My father was content just watching Matteo. Massimo was focused on his phone. And I… Fuck, I wasn’t sure what I felt or where I stood.

“Matteo,” Grace’s panicked voice traveled across the house. He didn’t hear her, his head slowly shifting towards me, dropping over onto my shoulder.

“I’ll go tell her he’s here,” Maria whispered in a low tone and rushed out of the kitchen. She didn’t want to stir up Matteo, who was falling asleep. Less than twelve hours and this little boy had my staff wrapped around his finger.

Maria came back with Grace, and her eyes immediately went to her son. She looked fucking gorgeous in a black tank top and baggy silky pajama bottoms that sat low on her hips, exposing skin on her lower belly. My cock immediately jolted to attention. My wife has had that effect on me from the moment I saw her in my nightclub. You'd think it would ease up, but it had only gotten worse.

I watched relief cross her face at seeing Matteo and turn into a soft smile. "Is he falling asleep?"

I nodded at the same time that my father replied, "Sì."

"Sit down, Grace. I'll get you some coffee," Maria offered.

"Um, I can-"

"No, you sit down. I remember how you like your coffee."

Grace tensed slightly at the reference of our past, but my father wouldn't let her retreat. "Here, sit with me Gracy."

He patted an empty seat between Matteo and himself. Her gaze darted to her son who was now soundly asleep, against my arm. Then her eyes traveled over me, and I watched her pale, delicate throat move as she swallowed hard. Her gaze was stuck on my chest, lingering over my tattoos. The tattoos always fascinated her. She wouldn't meet my eyes, her cheeks blushing light pink.

She wants me, the thought pierced through my brain victoriously. *My wife is still attracted to me.*

"Morning, Grace." She startled and her eyes snapped up. "Did you sleep well?" I asked her, pretending not to notice her attraction towards me. All the while, I schemed how I would get my wife into my bed as soon as possible.

"Fine." She focused on her coffee and turned to look at my dad, taking the offered seat. "Could we get bed rails or something for that bed? It is too high up, and I kept waking up to ensure he didn't fall out. I don't know how I didn't feel him get out of bed."

I glanced at Maria. "We got them," she assured me. "We didn't want to go in and wake up the baby or you. But I'll have someone install it today."

Grace smiled at her gratefully. "Thank you very much, Maria."

"Of course." She smiled back and went back to doing whatever she was doing.

"Matteo woke up early," my father patted my wife's hand. "I heard him call out so I opened the door and took him. You needed rest."

“Thank you. I just can’t believe I slept so hard that I never even heard anything.”

“You were tired,” my father comforted her. “That was a long trip.”

“Yeah,” she muttered under her breath. “An unnecessary and forced trip.”

My father refused to let her words deter him from his happiness of having my wife back. Honestly, it would have been comical if only I didn’t know I was the reason she hated to be back.

“This is good; you are back. You made me very happy.” Oh, my father was going all out. “Now, I can die in peace, but first I want to see Matteo grow up.” A resigned breath left her lips. “You did a good job raising him, Gracy.”

Yes, my father worshipped the ground Grace walked on. I could see my wife shift uncomfortably in her seat.

“Um… thank you, Nonno. But he’s only two.”

“When is his birthday?” he inquired. God, if he got it into his head to throw some crazy children’s party, I’d have to put a stop to it all.

“October.”

My old man grinned like he just got the best gift of his lifetime. “What day?”

She acted like she didn’t want to tell him. I couldn’t understand what the big deal was.

“October 17th.”

“Perfecto, it is coming soon.”

Grace nodded, avoiding his eyes now too. Instead, her gaze shifted to her son’s sleeping form. She watched her son’s little hand wrapped around my finger with a sad expression. Like she was thinking about a painful memory she wanted to forget. I couldn’t help but ponder at her strange behavior. Honestly, I was surprised she didn’t take her son’s high chair and put it as far away as possible from me.

“Yours and Ella’s stuff will be here this morning,” I told her, breaking the silence.

Anger flashed in her eyes. “I expect you to have all our stuff packed up and shipped back when we leave too.”

“And where are you going to go?” I taunted her. “Back to the Romano empire.”

Angry red blotches marked the skin on her chest and her breathing slightly labored. I pissed her off. *Good.*

"Luciano." I didn't miss the warning in my father's voice, but I never wavered my eyes from my wife. Her whole posture tensed, her gaze burning with hate.

Ignoring my father, I continued. "Don't even contemplate calling them. This time, I'll know before you betray me."

"Fuck. You." Sitting rigidly, her spine stiff, the look my wife gave me was a clear indication of how much she despised me. I remembered back to our early days of marriage. We fought back then too, but we only did it when alone, without witnesses. Even when I taunted her, she always refused to bait around my father worried he'd get upset. Clearly, she no longer had those qualms.

Ella walked in at that moment, breaking up the glaring contest my wife and I had going on.

"Morning," Ella murmured and handed my wife her phone. A look they shared, a jerky nod, and my wife bent her head reading something on her phone. An emotion flashed on her face, but Grace now was unlike the woman I married. She was much better at hiding her emotions.

I glanced at Massimo, telling him silently to check the tracker.

Grace's eyes focused on her phone. I couldn't tell whether she just had good news or bad news. She carefully masked her feelings. Her only betrayal was her lower lip between her teeth. She used to do that when she was nervous.

Her soft, full lips were torture to gaze upon. I could still remember how they felt wrapped around my cock, how expertly she sucked and took all of me deep down into her throat.

Great, now I'd have to jerk off before heading for my morning meeting with the Columbians. My phone beeped, and in slow motion, so I didn't wake up Matteo, I took it and read the message.

Firewalls on the device.

Need to hack.

If Massimo told me the sky was falling, I would have been less shocked. Why in the hell would Grace have firewalls on her phone? What was she hiding?

Do it.

"Everything okay, Gracy?" My father asked her in a concerned tone.

Her smile was forced as she locked her phone. “Yes, of course,” she assured him, lying expertly.

I watched her get up from her seat and opened the tray of the highchair.

“Hold him up,” she spoke softly. Placing the tray on the table, she leaned over and gently picked the boy up, wrapping him into her embrace. He stirred, but she murmured something softly and he went right back to sleep, with his head on her chest.

Without a backward glance, she left the room.

“Umm, is it okay if I take my coffee cup into my room?” Ella asked.

I nodded and watched her rush out after her friend.

“How long will it take you to penetrate those firewalls?” Massimo was one of the best when it came to technology. I had no doubt he would get it done.

“An hour, maybe two,” he muttered. “They are good.”

“What’s going on?” My father inquired.

“Nothing to worry about, Pa.” And that was the truth. There was nothing to worry about because Massimo would have their code broken in no time.

THE MORNING MEETING WITH THE COLUMBIANS WAS LONGER THAN I wanted to. Truthfully, I didn’t even want to be here, although I was the one that started the entire thing in my efforts to bring the Romano family down once and for all.

“Alphonso expects the shipment within four days,” Raphael continued. He was pissed and wanted to go into attack mode against Alphonso and Cassio’s father. We had to calm him down, assure him to let the cards play out. “Of course, nothing will come.”

Once it was revealed that Romano wanted to set Raphael up and get him killed, the latter had a hard time pretending he could work with Alphonso Romano. He hated his guts to start with, knowing he tried to have his half-sister drugged. This just tipped the iceberg. He’d have to play along, pretend he didn’t know that Alphonso planned on taking goods from Raphael and then double crossing him. It wasn’t as if we were going to

deliver women to Alphonso, even if he wasn't planning on double crossing him.

"And you and your men will not be there," I added. He pressed his lips into a thin line, showing his displeasure. "Before we kill him, Raphael, we need to let the cards play out. Let him fall. Don't doubt me when I say, he will die."

"I want that motherfucker dead now," he gritted. "For sending men after Isabella. If Vasili didn't intervene, they would have drugged her… kidnapped her for one of their fucking trafficking containers. Benito King too."

"My father won't be far behind him," Cassio assured him.

Raphael nodded, not exactly happy but satisfied enough to let it go. Cassio was a man of his word, so he knew we could depend on him not to break it.

"Also, there is something I heard," Raphael grumbled. "It is probably useless information."

"What is it?" It was important we don't discount any information. No matter how unmeaningful it might seem.

"I overheard Alphonso discuss the delivery of a woman," he started explaining. "To Benito. It didn't sound like his usual trafficking; something was off with it. Kept referring to her as the belle of the season."

"What woman?" Cassio asked warily. He couldn't stand his father, hated his guts for the cruelty he bestowed on everyone. But it seemed Benito constantly had something up his sleeve.

Raphael shrugged his shoulder. "Fuck if I know. But whoever the woman is, she is causing Alphonso trouble."

"My kind of woman then," I muttered.

"Yeah, and he mentioned that she should have been delivered years ago," he added. The information didn't make any sense, but we'd have Luca check into it.

We went through a few more details and called it a day. Cassio left, meeting Luca somewhere outside the city, and I wanted to rush back home. Instead, I had one more meeting to take care of. Reluctantly, I had to admit to myself that knowing my wife was in my home soothed me.

It hasn't been even a day since Grace returned… correction, since I dragged her back, and I wanted to be wherever she was. Last night I found myself wishing she was in my room. I didn't even care if she let me fuck

her, I just wanted her within my sight. I wasn't surprised she didn't sleep in our bedroom, but damn if it wasn't disappointing. Talk about being a drooling, lovestruck lover boy.

Yes, I slept better than any other night since my wife disappeared, but I also spent the entire night fantasizing about her… under me, on top of me, in the shower, bent over the couch. In turn, it made me agitated as fuck as the day progressed.

I dialed up Massimo as I walked into my office. "Everything ready?"

"Yes, they are all in a virtual lobby, waiting for you." Seriously? Fuck, I finally get to see the Ghost. "Except for one."

And the hope was squashed.

There was no doubt in my mind which one wasn't. This was the meeting to kick off the plans and schedule for the next six months. I have kept the best for myself. As for others… even if Alphonso Romano or Benito King did business with them, I didn't give a fuck. They weren't that good and most runners avoided doing business directly with Benito King.

After that meeting, I finally went home. Once there, I strode directly to the surveillance room.

Massimo lifted his head. He could tell I was in a pissed off mood during the last meeting. I caught him more than once during our virtual meeting stifling his grin. Of course, it wasn't anyone's fault that the Ghost didn't show. But I still wanted to shoot all those assholes. It was a good thing that only Massimo and I could see everyone, all they saw during that meeting was each other's face, never us.

What was the deal with the Ghost? I need that motherfucker on my payroll. After my last email, there was no reply, and I found myself wondering if I lost that runner. The services of that individual were highly sought after, and the Ghost only took two jobs, three per month tops. The confirmation email with acceptance of my offer never came, and I debated whether I offered enough now. The Ghost was offered the highest retainage, but I was willing to up it to ensure the acceptance. But a response would have to come in order to start the negotiation.

I checked my emails on the phone for the hundredth time since the virtual meeting ended. My phone buzzed signaling an incoming email, and I saw the reply. I quickly swiped it open and read it.

To: Ruthless King

From: The Ghost

Agreed to retainage and keeping it exclusive to you. I'll need a few days' notice for upcoming transactions.

Sorry, I couldn't make your virtual meeting. My terms are unchanged in regards to privacy. If that's a problem, I can't do this.

Let me know. Otherwise, business as usual.

G

My lip curved slightly at reading the response. Somehow it didn't surprise me, though I had to wonder whether this runner had brass balls or just wasn't afraid. The reputation of the Ruthless King on the black market wasn't the shiniest one, but I paid well, and as long as you didn't fuck me over, I was fair. At least I believed I was fair.

"Meeting went well, huh?" he retorted sarcastically. We had a bet whether the Ghost would show. I thought I made it appealing enough for the person to bite the bait. We were both curious to know whether it was a man or a woman behind that title. My intuition told me it was a woman, but the way the Ghost handled business made me think it was a man. Massimo was certain it was a man. I wasn't so sure though. Especially after that email with the comment about the beach. Men are usually not excited to go to the beach.

"Yes, it went peachy," I spat back dry. "As you well know. Though I just got an email from the Ghost." I quickly started typing my reply, letting the Ghost know the privacy terms were fine. "The privacy terms are a deal breaker."

"So, are you keeping the Ghost on or cutting him loose?" I noted Massimo said *him.*

I grinned. "I'm still not convinced it is a ***him***," I told him. "But yes, I'll accept the terms." Switching to a more interesting subject, I tilted my head towards the surveillance monitor. "What have those two been up to?"

I tilted to the screen. It showed Grace and Ella by the pool.

"Pretty much this most of the morning." His eyes lingered on Ella. I knew he had hots for her. Apparently, quite a bit of hots.

“Any progress with Ella?” I questioned him.

His eyes darkened and he grunted. “She avoids talking.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Just talking?”

“Fuck off, Luciano,” he grumbled. There was no doubt those two were already fucking. “She’ll talk eventually.”

Yeah, good luck with that. Those two had anyone connected to me on the enemy of the state list. By default, Massimo was shit out of luck. Still, it didn’t hurt to try that route.

We had a bet about Ella going. She’d be an easier one to cave than Grace. I saw the way she watched Massimo. He might be able to get some information out of her way before Grace would spill anything to me.

But at least he was getting laid. He didn’t have to outright say it, but it was clear he was doing perfectly well in that department.

“Were you able to crack the firewall?” I questioned him. No wonder our tracer on both their devices showed no activity. They were both hiding all their transactions behind layers of firewalls.

“Almost there.” If I wasn’t so agitated and needed to know what my wife was doing, I’d laugh. Massimo fucking hated that those two were giving him run for his money. He was actually impressed and planned on using some of its set up to upgrade our own security system.

“Where is Roberto?” I questioned him.

“He was with your father for about five minutes and then headed for the city. He said he had to take care of some shit.” Frowning, I wondered what shit he would have to take care of. I didn’t send him to take care of anything for me. I glanced at the screen again, forgetting Roberto, and Massimo continued as if he could read my mind. “Grace has been messing around on the laptop and Ella sunbathed and swam all morning.”

“And the boy?”

“Your father took him to a playground.” I raised my eyebrow. “It will be hard when the boy leaves. Your father won’t like it.”

I frowned. I didn’t like to think about Grace leaving. If I could help it, it would never happen again. Besides, I told my father she was staying. I just needed time and her to stop fucking ignoring me or glaring at me.

Music blared through the monitors and both of us looked back at the screens. Grace and Ella were laughing, signing along the song. More like screaming, because neither one of them could carry a single damn tune.

If you’re looking for love

Know that love don't live here anymore.

Yeah, they were also butchering the tunes. My eyes zeroed on my wife. She looked relaxed and happy. Whenever she was around me, she was tense. It didn't take a genius to know she was determined to keep her distance. She trusted me less now than when we first got married.

Yeah, I wonder why, jackass? My mind mocked, but I firmly shut it down.

My eyes roamed over her body. She still had that suntan glow from her time in Italy. I thought she was beautiful when I first saw her three years ago, but it was nothing to the way she looked now. She was breathtakingly captivating. Yes, there was still vulnerability to her but it was her strength that shone through. How she challenged me at every turn! And her body, in that bikini.

Fuck, what is she wearing? My train of thinking abruptly ended. Is that like the tiniest bikini ever invented? And she wore that all day while Massimo watched her.

Massimo pulled his phone up.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I barked out. If he tried to take a picture of my wife in that tiny bikini, cousin or no, I'd shoot him.

"I'm shazaming the song."

I frowned. "What the fuck for?"

"Got to keep up with the trend of those two," he muttered. "Ah, Miley Cyrus' "Someone Else"."

"Should we take off our bathing suits and just sunbathe nude?" Ella's exclamation came through the screen, amid their singing.

"What a great idea," my wife exclaimed.

Before I knew what I was doing, I strode in angry steps out the door and onto the patio. I didn't realize Massimo was behind me till I stopped abruptly at the terrace to see my wife reaching for her back strap to untie her bikini.

"Don't even fucking think about it!" I growled, shooting glares at my wife. If I wouldn't be seeing her tits, nobody else would either.

She glanced over her shoulder. "First of all, you have no right to tell me what I can or cannot do," her voice was unperturbed, dismissing me with her scolding look. "And second, I'm itching my back. Unless you volunteer to be my pool boy and scratch-"

I was behind her in one heartbeat, two seconds, and three strides.

“Sure, I volunteer,” I rasped in her ear. “I volunteer to scratch your itch.”

She was getting under my skin. Fuck, she has been under my skin from the moment my eyes met her sparkling gaze three years and nine months ago.

My callused palm placed against her back, I felt her stiffen at my touch. She hated my fucking guts. I waited, expecting for her to move away from me but she remained still, almost as the two of us dared each other who’d stop the connection first. It wouldn’t be me because I was finally touching her bare, soft skin. I have been itching to touch her since I found her.

I would take more from her. She’d sleep in my bed tonight.

“I want you to get rid of that hair color,” I growled. My voice was rougher than I intended. It was on the tip of my tongue to bark at Ella and Massimo to get lost so I could fuck my wife right here and right now. I didn’t give a shit who could see or hear us.

This need to bury my cock inside her was clawing at me, demanding I be sated.

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Chapter Twelve

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GRACE

I stood still, Luciano's warm palm against my back. I hated how it made my skin burn, the tingling sensation shooting throughout my body, my blood sizzling with need.

It is not for his touch, I tried to convince myself. It was a natural reaction to have a physical reaction after feeling man's hand on me after so many years.

I had to fight the urge to close my eyes and lean back into his touch. My heart thundered in my chest, excitement and adrenaline mixing together. Luciano Vitale would end up costing me more than my life if I lowered my guard. I'd stick around till the annulment came through, then we would run and never look back.

"I have to say, Luciano," I started, although my voice was slightly high-pitched. "You suck as a pool boy. I've had so much better. So either scratch the spot or step away from me."

"Scared, Tesoro?" he whispered the question into my ear. His breath was hot, igniting my blood with each syllable.

That was the most terrifying part. I didn't feel fear, only a burning desire that would turn me into ashes at any second. The need to feel his hands all over my skin wiped any reason or sanity, leaving me only with want. This aching want for this man… the ache only he could sate.

"Mamma," my son's voice woke me up from the haze and impending doom under my husband's touch.

I shook off his touch and ran to Matteo. "Hey, buddy," I lifted him up into the air. "How was the playground?"

“Fun.”

My eyes shifted to Luciano’s father. “Thanks for taking him to the playground.”

He grinned, and it struck me how much my son looked like his father and grandfather. The resemblance was plain as day. Luciano was a perceptive, smart man, and I feared he’d see it any moment. Each second around these men was a danger. We needed to be out of here before those two figured out who Matteo’s father was.

“Boy likes the swings,” the old Matteo announced. “Davvero?” he asked his grandson. *Right?* Matteo nodded eagerly, his whole face lit up from happiness. “But now we are hungry for lunch.”

Matteo wiggled out of my arms and ran up to Luciano’s father. “Nonno, Nonno.”

Each time I heard Matteo call out *Nonno* to Luciano's father, a pang of regret hit me. It felt like I robbed him of the knowledge that he had a grandchild. Not *like* I robbed him… I did, but it wasn’t all my fault. His son was to blame too.

“I’ll go ahead and feed him,” I said in a strained voice. “He is full of energy.”

Luciano’s father just shrugged his shoulders. “I like it. He reminds me of Luciano when he was that age.”

I swallowed hard, my mouth desert dry. I always thought Matteo was Luciano’s twin. Nonno just confirmed it. Did he suspect? Luciano’s father was very perceptive. After all, his son got it from him.

Although when it came to me, my husband was blind as a bat, I thought sarcastically.

I wanted to honor Luciano’s father when I named our son. But I believed I’d never see him again, any of them again. Now I pondered whether it was a smart thing to do. I watched my toddler walk away from me with his grandfather, hand in hand, in the direction of the kitchen. The youngest generation and the oldest.

Damn it, I didn’t want Nonno to experience more loss. Or Matteo. This had to end as soon as possible so we could all move on and leave all this behind once and for all.

I turned my back to Luciano and bent over to pick up my laptop. Stuffing it into its slip, I glanced over my shoulder.

“Luciano, I want the annulment expedited. With your connections, I’m sure you can have it done fast.”

I was so lost in him, I didn’t even notice Massimo standing to the side. Of course, that man was always by his side. I narrowed my eyes on him. I wouldn’t forgive either one of them for that evening when they discarded me like some garbage.

I strode quickly away from both of them, and the memories that opened my heart and made it bleed. Even after all that time, it still caused physical pain in my chest.

I was almost ten feet away from them when Ella’s voice reached me. “Wait, Grace.”

My step slowed down but I didn’t stop. “Grace, what was that about?

“We have to get out of here,” I murmured low. “The sooner, the better.”

“What about the annulment?”

“I’ll give him a timeline. If he can’t make it happen within that time, we need to go.”

“Shit, are you falling for him again?”

Abruptly stopping, I glared at her. “No. I hate his guts,” I hissed.

Turning my gaze back to where I left Luciano, I noted he still stood there, his eyes on me and that damn, arrogant, ever-knowing smile on his kissable lips.

“Matteo is getting attached to Luciano’s father and to Luciano. You should have seen Matteo this morning, sleeping against Luciano. And it’s only been a day. The longer we stay here, the riskier it is.”

I took a big breath and locked eyes with Ella. “I want to figure out how to get my hands on my parents’ will. The sooner, the better. If Luciano doesn’t have an annulment done by then, we clear out of here. Can you work on hacking the Romano network?”

She nodded. Ella became really good at hacking, and our firewalls were strong, thanks to her picking up a few tips during her relationship with Dietrich.

“How are we going to get away from Luciano?” Her question was barely a whisper. “His guys are watching our every single move.”

Boom bum. Boom bum. Boom bum.

“I’ll move his attention to something else,” I replied in a barely audible voice. *I just have to figure out what.*

“The man is devouring you with his eyes,” she muttered. “Maybe sleep with him and keep him distracted that way.”

My sweet spot between my legs pulsed at the idea but my heart cringed. *No fucking way.* That man would ruin me, utterly destroy me because despite everything that happened, he was still my weak spot.

“More like he would be my distraction,” I muttered begrudgingly under my breath. “Forget that for now. Let’s focus on robbing Ian Laszlo of my will and finding my uncle’s kid. Tomorrow we'll *accidentally* run into Ian.” I put an air quotation when I said accidentally. “And in the meantime, we keep digging for my uncle’s kid’s identification.”

“I couldn’t believe it when I read it,” she mumbled. It was the message that alarmed both of us. It was the reason she handed me this morning in front of Luciano. “Nor that I lucked out when I hacked into his network.”

“Honestly, I can’t believe he has a kid,” I told her, still shocked with that discovery. My uncle was a cruel bastard, and he shouldn’t be allowed around children or innocent people. As far as I was concerned, my grandmother’s and his evil was contagious. “I always knew him to be with other men. I didn’t realize he liked women too.”

“But do you realize what that means?” she whispered. “His kid is thirty-five. That means, you are not the one owed to Benito King. It is his kid.”

“Maybe it is a boy?” I understood what she was saying, but it didn’t make it right to be sold off, regardless if it was my uncle’s kid or me.

“But then why would he hide the fact he had a kid?”

Yes, indeed! Why?

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS. THAT WAS ALL IT TOOK. BARELY TWO DAYS, AND I wanted to murder my husband more than anything else.

I was so furious I saw red. I barely stepped foot into his house, and he already dominated my life and my schedule. First at the pool, he swarmed me with his presence. Then demanded I change my hair color. Who in the hell did he think he was? But I bit my tongue and made the appointment. For the same day, just as he demanded. It was back to its ginger color.

Of course, I would never admit to him that I liked it better this way too. I never used permanent hair color so the hairdresser was able to strip the

color off without major damage to my hair and did an amazing job bringing it back to my natural color. Or as close as possible to it because honestly, after all that time, it was hard to remember the exact shade of it. It felt good to have it cut and freshened up.

Next, he designated Matteo's room closer to his own bedroom rather than Ella's and where I intended to sleep; I didn't complain. I just gritted my teeth and went along with it, reminding myself it was only temporary. Until I got the annulment. If I had to, I'd just sleep in Matteo's room. It was certainly big enough.

But now he went too far. He had all my stuff taken to his bedroom. If that man thought I'd sleep in his bedroom for one second while we wait for this annulment, he was crazier than I thought.

"Luciano, I have to talk-" My words trailed off as I burst through the office door finding Luciano with four other men I had never seen. All five of them were deep in discussion, with drinks in their hands. Luciano and another guy were sitting with their feet propped up on the table, one guy was lounging on a sofa and two were playing darts.

Yeah, these are some tough criminals right here, I scoffed in my head. And there was no doubt in my mind they were criminals. Just the air about them was enough to confirm that. Well, that and the fact that each one of them had a gun holster. I might have missed a little fact like that three years ago but not anymore.

I pierced them all with a glare. I hated them as much as my husband. Guilty by association, if you asked me. But of course, nobody asked me. Nobody cared that he dragged us back into this life we didn't want, jeopardizing my son.

Our son. Why did my mind try to be fair? Nothing my husband did was fair. So, no… *my son*!

I glanced around the space, and just like when we first got married, this space impressed me. Luciano's office was one of the biggest offices I had ever seen. I guess it made sense since he spent so much time here. Expensive mahogany furniture accented the entire room. There were two sofas to allow visitors to make themselves comfortable. The room was decorated with taste but mainly with comfort in mind.

The best feature of it was the extensive top to bottom French windows that led to a patio and allowed you to see over the whole property. The pool stretched barely fifteen feet outside.

“Ah, Grace.” Luciano greeted me with a wide smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“You- you,” I searched for the right words.

“Your husband, yes,” he finished sarcastically.

“You. Are. Not. My. Husband.” I spoke the words through my clenched teeth. I was so pissed off, I could barely see straight.

He tilted his head as if considering my words. “Funny, because I have paperwork that shows I am.”

“Well, that is funny indeed. Because I have experience showing you are an asshole.”

Someone started to laugh but quickly covered it by clearing their throat. But my gaze remained glued on my husband, wishing I could kill him with my glare.

“Did you come here to discuss our marriage status or something else, wife?”

A growl escaped me as I glared at him, locking my gaze with those hazel eyes I used to love so much.

“I want my own room,” I gritted through my teeth.

“No.”

“You don’t get to decide where I sleep,” I hissed.

“My house, my rules.”

“You fucking asshole. I don’t even want to be here. You are forcing me to stay here. I’d rather sleep on the street than under the same roof as you. But here I am. Until the annulment comes through, you will give me my own room or I-”

“Or what, wife?” he challenged me, a knowing smile on his full lips.

My blood boiled and an image flashed through my mind, me throwing something and smashing it into his handsome face, wiping that smug smile off his lips. Before my brain processed what my body was doing, that was exactly what I did. I reached for the first object closest to me and threw it flying across the room. It missed him and crashed against the wall.

I watched with horror as an antique vase shattered into million pieces, landing all over his floor, desk and some chips even landed into my husband’s hair. I hated his fucking guts.

The crash was followed by stillness, and I was painfully aware of my heart thundering in my chest. It beat so hard, I was scared my ribs would break. Silence stretched as all kinds of creative words played in my mind.

Each was worse than the previous, and I wanted to scream them all to his face. We've only been here forty-eight hours, and I hated it.

I despised him, his men, this house, this city. Every damn thing. It was a painful reminder of what he had done to me. I ignored his visitors. They didn't matter. Anything connected to Luciano had nothing to do with me, and I wanted as far away as possible from it.

"I hate your fucking guts." My voice dripped with the feelings and there was no mistaking that I meant those words.

"Wife, these are my friends. Cassio, Luca, Alessandro, and Nico. Let's leave family drama for later and say hi to them."

I never even turned my head their way. Manners be damned! I always tried to do the right thing, and what did it get me? A gun against my head, being tossed away like a piece of trash, used as a pawn by my family and my husband.

"I don't give a damn about your friends, Luciano." I spat out in disgust. "Any friends of yours are enemies of mine."

He was on his feet and hovering over me in my next breath.

Before I got a chance to process him getting to me so fast, he continued in a calm voice, a storm brewing behind those hazel eyes. "Now, Grace. We don't want to be rude to our guests. Be a good wife and say hi."

"No."

"Do I need to take you outside and put you across my knees?"

"Fuck. You. Husband."

His lip tilted up as if my rebellion pleased him. We stood toe to toe, his hard body too close to mine. I could smell this cologne, mixture of citrus and cedar, and feel the heat coming off him. The heat I craved last time I spent winter in New York.

"We'll do that later," he cooed softly, but there was a hard gleam in his eyes.

"You can do that later by yourself." It was stupid to challenge him, taunt him. But the reasonable part of me disappeared and only my anger, agitation, and need to hurt him were left. "I want my own room."

"No." I didn't realize my feet had taken backward steps, and suddenly I found myself against the wall.

"I agreed to stay here till our annulment comes through," I hissed. "Stay out of my way. Otherwise, I'll make you regret ever finding me."

He laughed, the sound bitter.

“Too late for that, wife.” Despite my anger and hate, it still hurt to hear him say that. I wanted to slap him, claw his beautiful face, make him hurt like he had hurt me. “Now greet our guests.”

“How about I greet them the way you said farewell to me?” I raised my chin in fake bravado. He was so much taller than me, I had to crane my neck for better effect. “A game of Russian Roulette. Which one should I pull the trigger on first?”

Something flashed in those hazel eyes, but he quickly recovered and blanked his expression. *Probably a regret that bullet never came!* His head bent forward, and I could feel his hot breath against my earlobe.

“You don’t want me to punish you here, Tesoro.” I knew fear flashed in my eyes because he chuckled softly. “That’s right, there will be punishment. But if you behave now, I’ll save it for later. And you might even enjoy it.”

“You have no right.” I meant to sound defiant, tough, but the words came out in a breathless whisper. I hated having him so close to me. I didn’t want to smell him, feel his body brushing against mine. Oceans between us was not far enough if you asked me.

“I’ll make you scream so the entire household hears.” He made promises that I dreaded he intended to keep. But I would fight him. I wasn’t that same young girl anymore.

I scoffed in fake bravado. “What the fuck ever, Luciano. Go fuck yourself.”

His hand gripped tight around my arm and he pulled me along through the door, into the hallway. I thought he’d dragged me through the house to our bedroom. But instead, he shoved me into the closest, dark corner, a mere ten feet from his office. I noted from my peripheral, his office door remained open.

“Always so defiant. What shall we do with that mouth of yours?” His voice was a warm caress on my cheek, sending shivers through my body.

They are shivers of disgust, I told myself.

His mouth crashed against mine. The kiss was meant to punish, dominate, bruise. And God helped me, I liked it. I haven’t felt another man’s lips on me since that day over three and a half years ago. It felt like a different lifetime, different me, but I always craved that feeling. Before it all burned down to ashes.

His lips trailed down my neck, leaving searing skin in its wake.

“Stop it.” My voice was small but I refused to beg. I refused to plead with him. “Your friends will see.”

I felt him more than heard him chuckle. “I’d never let them see you like that. That pleasure is reserved only for me.” He let the words linger in the air before he continued, “But I’ll let them hear you submit to me. So, they know who you belong to.”

I tried to push away from him, but it was like trying to move a mountain.

The palm of his hands were on both of my thighs, trailing up. My mind kept warning me, reminding me how much I despised him. But my body refused to obey, to remain still. Instead, it molded under his hands, pushing into his touch. My legs parted, the sweet spot between my thighs pulsed with need for him. I hated my body for craving him.

“Are you wet for me, Tesoro?” he purred. I bit my bottom lip, refusing to let the answer slip through. I hated that my body responded to his touch, even after all this time apart. All he had to do was glance my way and my body woke for him. For the past three years, every fiber of me was in a sleep mode; till Luciano came for me.

“Oh, Tesoro. You are soaked,” he groaned against my neck. In a haze, I watched him lower himself down onto his knees. I should push him away. Right now! All I had to do was shove my knee into his beautiful face, break his nose, and take off. But like a stupid, weak woman, I watched him under my lashes, anticipation building up.

His fingers hooked onto my panties, and I watched him slide them down my legs. I expected him to discard them to the side, instead he brought them to his nose and he inhaled deeply. My insides shook in sick excitement.

What is wrong with me?

“Smells like my wife,” he rasped. “I’m keeping these. I’ll wrap them around my dick later and jerk off thinking about you.”

My lips parted and a soft gasp echoed through the fog in my brain. Was that me? It was a shock. At least I tried to tell myself it was. It certainly wasn’t because I was ready to unravel right here in front of him, hearing his dirty words.

Grabbing my one ankle, his hands surprisingly gentle, I watched his tanned hand covered in ink drape my leg over his shoulder and dip his head between my thighs. The moment his lips touched my pussy, a loud moan escaped me.

“Luciano.” I should tell him to stop. I needed to fight him but my body refused to listen. My lips wouldn’t let the words come out. I wasn’t sure how or when my hands grabbed onto his hair, my fingers tangled through his short, dark strands. Instead of pushing him away, I pulled him closer, needing more of his tongue, his mouth.

His tongue teased my clit and stars already swirled behind my eyelids. He had barely touched me and my insides already shook, close to bursting into sweetest pleasure. The scruff of his five o’clock shadow tingled against my inner thigh, rasping against the soft flesh.

All my anger melted and turned into lust under his expert touch. His tongue swirled my clit in lazy circles, and I twisted my body, pulling away or pushing against his mouth… I wasn’t sure. The sensation overwhelmed every single reasonable thought. His hand grabbed my ass and held me firm against his mouth.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “More.”

I’d regret it later. I’d think about it later. Now, I just needed to come undone. *For me; not for him*, I lied to myself.

He pushed his finger inside me, and his mouth worked me mercilessly. His growling sounds made it seem like he was enjoying the best dessert of his life.

“Fuck, you taste amazing.” My moans got louder, and I bit hard into my lip to keep silent. I was right at the edge of the cliff, ready to jump off and spiral into an abyss of delightful pleasure. He was the only one that could ever do this to me.

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Chapter Thirteen

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LUCIANO

The scent of my wife drove me insane. Her aroused scent made my mouth water, like I have been deprived of food and water for centuries. Her slick sweetness was all around me. I had lost my mind to do this in the hallway, with my friends behind the office door. But I didn't give a fuck, as long as they didn't see her. I wanted them to know she was mine.

"Luciano," she cried out as my tongue slid up her slit. The restless, ruthless beast inside me finally retreated, satisfied with Grace on my tongue.

Fuck, she tasted so damn good. Like my woman!

Sucking on one of her pussy lips, I wiggled my tongue around her bud. Her body hummed with need, twisting under my mouth. The moans filling the hallway made it abundantly clear what we were doing.

Her fingernails raked through my hair, scraping against my scalp as I devoured her. Keening sounds rasped from my wife's lips, her pussy on my face. I would die a happy man, just like this. With her taste on my tongue.

I nipped at her clit. Her body tensed for a brief second before she shuddered and she flew over the edge, with my name on her lips. Just the way it should be. I lapped at her juices like the greedy man that I was, my eyes drinking the sight of her.

My wife's cheeks flushed, her hair attractively messy. She looked like a pleasured woman. My woman. Her eyes locked on mine, the haze in those beautiful eyes slowly lifted. But instead of the softness I was used to seeing in them after I brought her to heights, there was only resentment there.

“You are an asshole,” she spat out, her voice slightly hitched.

I swiftly stood up and pressed my mouth hard on hers. “Taste yourself on my lips, wife,” I told her, my lips inches from hers. “Because that’s where you’ll be until this is over. Now, go greet our guests.”

She pushed herself away from me, smoothing her dress down her thighs, her cheeks still flushed from what we had just done. There was no mistaking what just happened in this hallway, even if she would have been silent through the whole ordeal.

But she wasn’t quiet through her pleasure, I grinned smugly. She loved every second of it. Although regret was clear on her face now.

“They are your guests,” she bit out. “Not mine. You can tell them if they get anywhere near my son or Ella, I’ll kill them.”

She strode away without a backward glance. Her hips swayed in unintentional seduction, her cream dress accentuating each curve of her body, tempting me. There was nothing more I wanted to do than to stride after her, throw her over my shoulder, and take her into our bedroom where I’d fuck her for days. Forget about my friends, forget about the past, the Romano family… forget about everything except her sweet body underneath me.

I was stupid to insist her sleeping in our bedroom. She’d probably slice my throat in the middle of the night. The hate filled glares she threw my way were evidence how much she despised my guts.

I’d fuck the hate right out of her, I grinned to myself. It wasn’t a brilliant plan, but it was all I had.

I headed back into my office, all my friends still there. It wasn’t as if they could have left; not unless they wanted a first row seat with a show while I ate my wife’s pussy.

“I thought someone said your wife was a meek pianist?” Of course, it would be Luca to fucking edge me on. “And here she is threatening to kill us all.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered. My wife's sweetness lingered on my tongue, my cock rock-hard for her. It has been a permanent side effect from the moment I’ve found her and getting worse by the minute.

“She hasn’t forgiven you?” Cassio asked the unnecessary question.

“No.” I had a feeling she’d never forgive me. I wouldn’t have. None of the men in the room would have forgiven such an offense, so why would I expect anything else from my wife?

“Are you sure you want to sleep in the same room?” Alessio questioned. “She might kill you in your sleep. She hates your guts.”

I glared at him, hating his guts right this second for telling the truth. “Fuck you, asshole.”

Alessio chuckled like the bastard he was. “I’m good. Although, you might want to keep your woman under you all night. From the sounds we just heard, she seems to be receptive to you in that arena.”

“I might shoot you one of these days,” I growled at him but a grin played on my lips. He was right. Grace was receptive when I pleasured her. She had been avoiding me from the moment she set foot back in my house. She either clung to her son, my father, or hid who the fuck knows where. Besides, she had to get over her jet lag too.

“Don’t pay attention to Alessio,” Nico chimed in. “He’s just jealous because he can’t get his dick into the woman he wants.”

Alessio promptly flipped him the bird. We all knew the story. He touched what was forbidden and now he craved more. It would seem all of us had rough starts with our women. Nico was no different.

“I swear, watching you guys makes me grateful not to deal with women on a longer than one night basis,” Luca retorted dryly.

“Your time is coming, brother.” Cassio smirked at his younger sibling. “And I look forward to seeing you squirm.”

It was Luca’s turn to flip the bird at his older brother. “Hold your breath, brother. See how well it works out.”

Cassio flipped him two birds. Here we were, men almost in our forties, and we were so mature we were flipping each other middle fingers.

“Okay, back to the business at hand,” I stopped all this bird flipping. “Do we have any update on fucking Alphonso and what he is doing?”

Nico grabbed his glass and took a drink. “I have a little bit more detail on the Romano connection to the Kings.”

Nico, or the Wolf, as we called him, had an unkeen way of finding out details on everything and everyone. We called him the Wolf because the bastard had the instincts of a wolf. He was highly intelligent, sometimes a loner, dominant, but above all loyal. Except that his family fucked him over - it certainly seemed a running theme around here.

“We are all ears,” I told my friend.

“Now take this with a grain of salt since there is no hard evidence,” Nico started. “The Romano family is old, they go back at least two

centuries here in the States. So does the King family." Cassio nodded. We all knew that the King family ran the criminal underworld in Europe, and when they migrated here, they continued the same path, establishing their territory. "The story was there was some bad blood between your ancestors back in Europe. The Romano family were wealthy and amongst nobility. A Romano daughter fell for one of the Kings while both families still lived in Europe. Once the Romano head found out, they hunted the man down and hung him. They considered them lower class. Shortly after, the Kings migrated to the States and established themselves. Revolutions swept through Europe and the Romano family lost pretty much everything. When they migrated, unfortunately for them, they landed in the King's territory. Anyhow, the agreement was made between the head of the King family and Romano family. Each generation would provide one woman, a belle, to the King family. As compensation for the man the Romano family killed."

"What the fuck-" Cassio grumbled. "Are you fucking shitting us? Because I am not in the mood for stupid stories."

"No, I am quite serious. I'm still digging, but it turns out the King family saw an opportunity. They expanded that agreement to some other families too. Some are one-time deals, others longer term deals. The problem is finding evidence to support this."

"So where did you hear this?" I questioned him. I had to side with Cassio here. It sounded like some damn fairy tale. And not a good one either.

"Of all the people, from my mother."

"And you believe her?" Cassio asked, his voice doubtful. Nico's mother wasn't exactly a role model.

"It was actually something I heard even when I was a kid, from my grandmother." Nico was fucking serious. "Apparently my great-grandfather hit a financial snafu and needed money. He was approached by one of your ancestors, Cassio, and was offered a bailout, in return for one of the belles in our family for two generations. My grandfather told him to go fuck himself, and that was it."

The meaning of it hung heavy in the air. This was something completely different to human smuggling.

"What do they do with women? They really marry a mobster?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "They offer them for sale. You know, fancy upbringing and good pedigree fetches a high price among men in our

world.” Yes, we all knew we were bastards. “But the word is that belles from the Romano family have been fetching the largest sum for centuries. And about hundred years ago, the Romano family got into human trafficking, led by their great-great grandmother. And guess who she teamed up with?” I had a suspicion but it was hard to believe all this shit. “You got it. With Cassio’s ancestors. The Romano family offered a perfect, legitimate front.”

“They were no longer required to offer their daughters?” All this churned my stomach.

“Oh no, the agreement still stands. The Belles and Mobsters' agreement continued, including belles from the Romano family. It is the biggest auction, fetching the largest sums. Women go to the highest bidder. Unfortunately for the Romano family, not all their family members had the stomach for it. There were hushed stories of random family members disappearing or being brought down if they tried to fuck with their new, secret business. Till Kennedy Romano. His feud against his brother was rather bitter.”

That was Grace’s father. My wife told me about her parents during our first few months of marriage. She loved them very much. I should have known all this before; we all should have. But the truth was that I was focused solely on avenging the death of my mother and sister. Both were killed by Alphonso Romano.

“How is it that none of us heard of this before?” And how was it not picked up in Grace’s background check that there was a feud between Kennedy Romano and his brother?

“Well, none of us are really from old families,” Nico retorted. “Alessio came from old money, but his family is based in Canada. My family only got rich about a hundred years ago with the construction boom. Your father, Luciano, was first generation in the States, and he worked himself within the ranks. And you quadrupled, if not more, what your father made, so you would have never needed the money. Cassio and Luca weren’t in those circles, and really their grandfather in Italy raised them. So their father kept them out of the loop.”

“Holy fucking shit,” Luca muttered. “Belles and mobsters. Who in their right mind would ever agree to offer a daughter to a man in our circles?”

He was right. I knew I wouldn’t want my children to be part of this underworld. It was cruel and unforgiving. It made me a hypocritical bastard

because I took Grace without consideration to the mafia world.

“I would imagine desperate people would agree to it,” Cassio muttered.

“I hate that fucking old bastard.” Luca didn’t hide his feelings about his father. He hated him with passion. Not that I could blame him.

“But again, there is no evidence for any of this. And good luck finding someone that would be willing to attest to this,” Nico added.

Cassio's jaw was pressed so tight, I thought it might snap at any second.

The dread was heavy like lead in the pit of my stomach. Grace was the only woman of her family’s current generation. Three years ago, I sent her right back to them. She ran, disappeared for the longest three years of my life. I thought her uncle hid her from me, but if there was an ounce of truth to this story, that couldn’t be. He worked with Cassio’s father. If he had her, she’d be in Benito King’s clutches, offered to the highest bidding mobster.

And I brought her right back into the lion’s den. I might as well have had her delivered on a silver platter.

My blood simmered, the anger at myself unlike ever before.

Nico continued speaking, “As you know, Alphonso only had a brother. So there was no Romano belle offering. Kennedy Romano was in politics; he was pretty good too. He had a childhood sweetheart that refused to marry him for many years. The world was flabbergasted. They were a perfect match. She came from old money. The whispering is that her family knew about the ongoing deal the Romano family had and the human trafficking. Kennedy Romano became educated by his wife in his own family business affairs, after which he cut all contact with the Romano family. His political career grew fast and strong. He was going after the mafia and crime relentlessly. There were stories he could have easily become the next president. And they had a little girl; the only child for that generation since Alphonso never married.”

The meaning of it lingered in the air. Grace was owed to the King family.

“The word is that Grace Romano was meant for Benito King’s legitimate son,” Nico concluded. “Whatever the highest price she fetches, Marco King is to pay double.”

I would never let them have her. I would kill every single member of the King family if I had to, but they would never have Grace. She was Vitale now. She was mine.

“What other families do the Kings have arrangements with?” Cassio gritted out.

“I don’t have concrete leads. Politicians, here in the U.S. and in Europe, movie stars, old families.” Nico took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled.

“Do you think maybe Grace knows?” Cassio’s question was reasonable.

I met Nico’s gaze. “We could ask her,” he suggested.

My eyes took in shattered vase pieces on the floor and my desk. “She won’t tell us anything,” I rasped. If all this was true and Grace knew about the belle deal, I have betrayed her in the worst way possible. Was that the reason she betrayed me that day? Did her uncle hold that over her head?

“Fuck, we have to do something,” Luca gritted.

“Do we know how it works? The belle offering?” I questioned. “When? Where?” The whole concept made me sick to my stomach. “Raphael mentioned he overheard Alphonso speak to Benito about the delivery of a woman.”

Cassio and I shared glances. There was no question who that woman was now. Did Alphonso Romano already know Grace was back in the States?

Massimo barged through the door at that moment, an alarmed look on his face.

“What is it?” Fuck, I didn’t know how much more bad news I could take today.

“I broke it.”

“Broke what?” Cassio and I questioned at the same time.

“I broke your wife’s firewalls.” He looked disheveled, which rarely happened to him. “You won’t fucking believe it.”

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Chapter Fourteen

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GRACE

I couldn't believe I let Luciano ravish me in the hallway. I was so mad at myself.

After I went to grab a new pair of panties, I went in the direction of Matteo's playroom. Being around him always grounded me. He was my reminder to get through this. It was all for him.

Opening the door softly in case he was napping, I was surprised to find Luciano's father sitting on the couch, building a wooden train set with Matteo. They both had wide smiles on their faces, speaking Italian. Neither one of them heard me come in.

"What are my two favorite men doing?" I asked, startling them both. Matteo stood up and ran to me, hugging my legs. I lowered down onto my knee and wrapped my arms around him.

"We are building the biggest train tracks," Luciano's father announced. "Want to help us?"

"Sure, I'd love to." I pressed a kiss on my son's forehead. "What do you say, Matteo?"

He eagerly pulled me along, and I sat in between the two of them. Matteo immediately handed me parts, putting me to work.

"You are doing such a good job, Matteo," Nonno commended him. Thankfully, he switched to English so I could understand their conversation too. "We'll have to make sure we have the right piece for the mountain. Davvero?" *Right?*

"How was the playground today?" I questioned Nonno as we all worked on our trail pieces.

“It was good. Matteo said he never saw such a big playground. We shall have one installed on the grounds tomorrow.”

I smiled at him. I wanted to tell him there was no need since we wouldn’t be staying long, but I hated to kill the old man’s enthusiasm and happiness. So I kept quiet.

We all worked on building the train tracks, all the while my thoughts raced through my mind. This annulment better go through quickly. I would be stupid to think I could resist Luciano on a long-term basis. Yes, I hated him, but my mind and body seemed to be at war here, and I was worried my body was winning. It didn’t bode well for my self-respect.

I remembered a phrase my mother used to always tell me. *It is a thin line between love and hate, Grace. Don’t ever mix up the two.*

I wished she was still here, and I could ask her for advice. I missed her so much. Being back here, so close to my family that took so much from me, was a blessing and curse. Since Ella and I went on the run, I have pushed all the memories away. I made myself not remember my mom, dad, my uncle, nor my grandparents. And of course, Luciano. The sad part was that he wasn’t even the worst villain in my life.

My uncle and grandmother were the worst villains of them all.

Truth was, I was scared out of my damned mind. And it wasn’t because of Luciano. That man showed me firsthand that he wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet into my brain, and yet, I was scared of the alternative with my uncle even more. I thanked all the saints for having a boy.

“Gracy,” Nonno’s hand was on mine, pulling me back to the scene at hand. “Are you okay?”

I forced a smile on. “Yes, of course.”

Matteo crawled into my lap and placed his hands on my cheeks. “Are you crying?” Nonno asked me at the same time.

My fingers reached for my face and realized it was wet. “I think my eyes hurt. Probably jetlag.”

Nonno didn’t believe me, but he let it go. I turned my lips into Matteo’s chubby hands and kissed his palms. “I’m okay, baby.”

My son’s hazel eyes watched me, reminding me so much of his father. I kissed his forehead tenderly. Truthfully, all the heartache Luciano brought onto me was worth it. Because I had my son. He was my life.

Just like I was my parent’s life. They protected me with all they had. And my uncle destroyed it all. Maybe it was time I made my uncle and

grandmother pay. When Luciano pretty much seduced me and then kidnapped me all those years ago, I was an inexperienced, naive, and a scared young girl. He scooped me up and, unknowingly, became my savior. Until that very moment, I had nobody to save me from the horrible fate. Gabriella and I were powerless against the agreement our ancestors made.

I wasn't so naive and inexperienced anymore, but I was still scared. *Fear is healthy*, I heard.

We played for an hour, before I finally stood up. "Okay, Matteo. We'll eat dinner, take a bath, and then bedtime."

Matteo started pouting, but he was tired. I knew it wouldn't take long before he reached an over-exhausted point. And Ella and I had some business to take care of tonight.

"Nonno," my voice was hesitant. "I need to take care of something tonight. Will you keep an eye on Matteo please?"

His clear eyes watched me, and there was no way that he didn't pick up on something. He was too smart not to see there was something going on.

"Of course, Grace," he replied. "Now let's go see what Maria has fixed us for dinner," Nonno chimed in before Matteo could protest further.

I gave him a grateful look and lifted Matteo into my arms. "Okay, lead the way," I told Nonno.

We exited Matteo's playroom area, following behind Nonno down the large staircase, and I silently cursed at the timing the moment I saw Luciano and his friends standing around the large entrance area discussing something in hushed tones.

I wanted to turn around and head in the opposite direction, but it was too late. They had all seen us.

"Ah, boys," Nonno beamed. "Matteo is ready for dinner. Want to join us?"

Silent curses blasted in my brain at the invitation. *Just say no. Say no. Please say no.*

"Hello, Mr. Vitale. We'd love to," one of them responded. *Ugh, lovely.* I didn't want to sit through dinner with this crowd.

I carried on, hoping Nonno would just continue talking and ignore us. But no such luck.

"Ah, Gracy. You have to meet these boys." I couldn't contain a scoff. Boys my fucking ass! My step faltered, and I turned around to face them. "This is Cassio King." He pointed to the man that accepted the dinner

invitation. Earlier I was too angry to really see these guys but... holy smokes! He was good looking. His dark hair and those tattoos on his hands and neck gave a *don't fuck with me* vibe. "-and his brother Luca." That one also had tattoos marking his neck, dark expression on his face. I was sure if I ran into him in the dark alley, I'd run the other way. He looked like a total badass. "Nico and Alessio." The latter two were more clean cut than Cassio and Luca but still gorgeous specimens. I hated to admit it but these guys were devastatingly handsome. Of course, none of them compared to Luciano, but they were pretty close. And every single one of them was dangerous. There was this air of ruthlessness about them. They smiled but it was all a facade. They'd kill you just as easily as smile. "And you know Luciano," Nonno added, chuckling.

"Unfortunately," I muttered.

"You didn't think so earlier," my husband retorted with a smug grin, and instantly my cheeks burned with embarrassment. I fucking hated this guy. I really did.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

Although there was a smile on his full lips, I couldn't decipher the look in his eyes. He stared at me with hunger or threat. Maybe those two were the same since either would shatter me.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Vitale," Cassio King greeted me, bringing my attention to him. All the men watched me with an odd expression. *Probably think I am crazy due to my earlier tantrum.* Or they probably knew what Luciano and I did in the hallway. Ugh, I shot Cassio with my most furious glare.

"It's Grace," I spat out, sounding bitchy.

"Well nice to meet you, Grace," another one of the men added. It was Cassio's brother, Luca. "Luciano has been keeping you hidden from us."

Was this guy for real? I rolled my eyes at him. "Whatever."

"You'll like them, Gracy." Nonno smiled gently, ignoring my obvious dislike of the men. "They are good boys."

I shook my head and muttered under my breath, "Right." Good boys and these men should not be mentioned in the same book, even less the same sentence.

"And this big boy is our Matteo," he introduced my son who watched the entire scene with fascination.

I shifted, adjusting my son's weight on my hip. Matteo babbled his greeting, grinning widely and reached out to go to Luciano.

"How old is he?" Nico asked.

God, I really didn't want to have this conversation right now.

"Matteo will be three soon. Sì?" Nonno beamed proudly.

Avoiding looking at any of them, I nodded, swallowing hard.

"There you are," Ella's voice had everyone's attention diverted from us. She came right on time and from the look we shared, she knew it. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Yay, you found me," I forced a cheer on with a fake smile. We locked eyes. "Remember we have that thing going on tonight?" I reminded her. "Nonno will keep an eye on Matteo."

She nodded, her skin slightly pale. Shit, did something else happen while I played with Matteo?

"Umm, Nonno, can Matteo go with you to the kitchen?" I asked.

"Yes, yes." He was so eager to spend time with Matteo. In just a few days, this man was captured by Matteo. Like he felt they were related, but that was a ridiculous thought. Nobody but Ella and I knew that. And we never betrayed each other.

"Hey, buddy. Ella and I will be right back. Okay?"

Matteo nodded and demanded, "Giù." *Down.*

Putting him onto his feet, he took three steps to Nonno, taking his wrinkly hand. And then surprised me by taking Luciano's hand. A heavy sigh left my lips seeing my toddler holding hands with his father and grandfather.

"Excuse me," I muttered with a trembling breath, turned away from the men and strode towards Ella, all the while committing the image of Matteo with them into my memory. If it wasn't for this whole fucked up circumstance, it would be a heartwarming sight to see Matteo holding hands with those two.

We both started walking towards the wide door, leading to the back garden and the pool.

"What's going on?" I whispered as soon as we were out of earshot.

I glanced around and noted all the men could still see us, and each one of them watched us. I was so tempted to flip them a bird but Nonno was still there with Matteo.

Pulling her away to the side, so they couldn’t see us, I repeated, lowering my voice further.

“You are freaking me out,” I mumbled. “What’s going on?”

“I hacked into your uncle's network again.” Her voice was barely above the whisper.

“Did you find out who his kid is?” What could have shaken her up so much?

“I’m not sure,” she mumbled.

“What do you mean?” I questioned her in a low voice. “Why are you so shaken up?”

She took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled. “He’s funding his illegal business with your assets as collateral.”

“What?” I hissed. “How?”

“His lawyer’s help.” Of course! Because the lawyer that handled my inheritance was the one and the same as my uncle’s lawyer. Ian Laszlo. And coincidentally my uncle’s lover. But nobody but Ella and I knew the latter. That lawyer was the executor of all my parent’s estate that was supposed to come into my possession on my twenty-fifth birthday. My parents trusted him; I trusted him.

“But that is not all, is it?” I have known Ella for a long time. She could read my emotions as well as I could read hers.

“No.”

The fact she kept her answers short told me this would be bad. Really bad. I watched her face, and I knew. I knew what was coming and still my damn hope refused to be extinguished. It was just two days ago that our life was good and we were content and happy.

“They know we are here.” Her voice shook with fear. “They know about Matteo and want to transfer all your assets to either your uncle or an anonymous person. But they never mention who it is. I think it is his kid.”

My heart squeezed in my chest with worry. *I won’t let them!* I’d protect my son with my last breath; I wouldn’t let them get their hands on him. He was innocent in all this. If the worst thing that happened was my uncle taking away all my inheritance, so be it. As long as he was safe and lived to grow up to be a man.

Thank God I didn’t have a girl.

From all the imaginable thoughts and worries, that was the one that mattered the most to me. How could my family do this, to their own flesh

and blood? The worst part was that my grandmother has been running it all and had no qualms sending me to pay our family's generational debt. *Who even does that?* It sounded like some bad movie.

"We have to run," I muttered and my heart clenched. Two nights back was all it took for them to find us. It would be hard to disappear again. But now that they knew about Matteo, we were running out of time. I wanted a happy life for him, not one on the run. I swallowed hard, knowing what I needed to do but just not having the strength to follow through.

"Yes, we have to run. But it will be hard this time. We need new identities, everything. It will take time, and I'm not sure if we have that kind of time."

I hated my family. I knew my uncle was no good, from the moment I heard him threatening my mother backstage all those years ago. I learned his identity after my parents' death and knew there was a good damn reason why they never went around my father's family. They were protecting me. I wanted to make my uncle and grandmother pay. Hurt them like they hurt so many others.

"Maybe we can fight back," I muttered under my breath. "Until we have new identities and are back on the run, we'll have to fight."

"How?" Ella was scared, and it showed. I was scared too, but knowing I had to protect Matteo at all cost gave me strength.

"What if we just say fuck it and send my family's empire crumbling?" The plan was forming in my head as I spoke. "We hit them where it hurts them the most." She watched me, her expression slowly changing. "Money. We take it all. Or do we kill them? Kill my grandmother and my uncle."

"What about your inheritance?"

The inheritance was from my mother's side. My grandparents from my mother's side were wealthy, and I was their only grandchild. They left me every single cent, about five hundred million.

"That inheritance won't do us any good if we are dead," I muttered. "Besides, we don't need that money. We have an arrangement with Ruthless King. He accepted the terms of keeping our privacy. We keep laundering the money till we have enough to survive."

We watched each other in silence for a few heartbeats before I continued.

"We were going to *run* into my uncle's lawyer tonight anyhow," I told her. "We continue with that plan. If I can get my hands on the will, maybe

there is something in it that would allow us to get it out of my uncle's hands. We keep digging for the name of Uncle's kid. And if we could somehow find a way to get closer to Grandma or Uncle, we'll kill them."

"Jesus, those are a lot of ifs," she mumbled. I knew it but I had nothing else. It wasn't as if two of us were master criminals. "Maybe you shouldn't insist on an annulment?"

The suggestion threw me off loop.

"Why?" She knew what Luciano did; she hated his guts as much as I did.

She took a shuddering breath in and slowly exhaled. "Well, if something happens to us, Matteo will need him. Nonno is good with him, and I know you don't like it, but Matteo likes Luciano. Nonno and your husband are a million times better than your uncle or your grandmother."

She was right about that. My family would destroy everything good about my son. There wasn't any doubt that he would be better off with his father or Nonno. It actually warmed my heart to see Matteo's little head leaning against Luciano this morning. Yes, it hurt, but in a weird way, it was a good kind of hurt. My heart squeezed at seeing my son with his father. The resemblance was so striking to me, but nobody noticed it.

"I am happy Matteo likes them," I ended up saying. Pushing my hand through my hair, I felt like we were at the crossroads. She was right, if something happened to us, Matteo would need Nonno and Luciano. "I should probably put a will in place."

"We could get rid of your uncle-" She let the words linger. "By killing Ian. Somehow draw him out."

"If we killed Ian, we aren't much better than my uncle," I told her in a whisper. Though if I was being honest, it crossed my mind to use him and kill him. Now what did that say about us? "Besides, how would we do it?"

Ella shuddered. "Shoot him, I guess. You are pretty good with the gun now." There was a huge difference between shooting a target and a human. "God, I never want to see your uncle or grandmother again."

I wrapped my arms around me. It was my sentiment exactly.

"Let's worry about tonight," I suggested. "Maybe we can somehow use Ian. Drug him or something" Her eyes snapped to me in surprise. Before Luciano seduced me, everyone thought Ian and I dated. We didn't and never would. He was my uncle's puppet. Yes, it wasn't the best idea to drug him but our options were limited. "He'd never know."

She raised her hand. “You don’t have to justify it to me,” she replied. Ian gave my uncle power of attorney over my well-being and my inheritance, removing the individual my parents designated. In fact, he did such a convincing job, I never even knew who was supposed to be my original caretaker. “He used you, has been using you all the while betraying you.”

“Yeah, seems to be a running theme.”

“So, I am all for giving him back some of his own medicine. Fuck, I suggested we kill him, so it isn’t like I have any room to talk about what is right or not.”

“Killing him doesn’t sit well with me,” I told her honestly. “His biggest crime is that he is my uncle’s lawyer and under his spell.”

I didn’t give a crap if those two were lovers, whether they loved each other or used each other. However, I did care that my uncle was able to use him to get what he wanted. But I considered it to be due to my uncle’s devious and evil mind. Or maybe I didn’t give enough credit to Ian. Who the hell knew!

“We’ll make it seem like a coincidence we ran into Ian,” I added.

“As long as your uncle is not with him,” Ella muttered under her breath.

“I guess if they are both there, maybe we should kill them both,” I retorted dryly, changing my earlier opinion. We might as well go all the way to hell. “God, how did we become this?” I muttered.

“We’ve been dealt some shitty cards.” Now, that was an understatement of the century. Our families with some fucked up agreement, offering their daughters up to criminals. “But hey, at least we found each other.”

I smiled softly at her statement. Despite all the things that happened, I was glad it brought us together

“And that’s priceless.” I meant it too. Ella and I have been through so much; to hell and back together. “Okay, let’s start with Ian. I’ll put a will in place and have a contingency plan for Matteo in case shit goes awry. Let’s focus on getting some information from Ian. Anything that would hurt my uncle. Keep digging for any information on Uncle’s kid. And we’ll swipe a few million out of Uncle’s and Grandma’s bank account tonight; it is their turn to get robbed.”

She nodded in agreement. “And hold off on the annulment.”

I was desperate for a clean slate, a fresh life for Matteo, Ella, and me. But as long as we had ghosts lurking after us, we’d never have a life

without looking over our shoulder.

“Okay, I won’t keep bringing it up,” I agreed. “Let’s go check on Matteo and eat something. Then we get ready for our outing. We haven’t even left yet and I am ready to be back and crash for the night.”

“Are you going to sleep in Luciano’s room tonight?” Ella’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Some noises are so hard to unhear. It was so… hot.”

A giggle escaped her right after that statement, and I couldn’t help but smile. That right there… mischief and teasing over the years was what made our life bearable. Sometimes I wished I was a bit more like her - more promiscuous, adventurous, willing to try things out regardless if I thought it was a good idea or not. Yet, I had to admit that our personalities, regardless of differences in our promiscuity levels, meshed well.

My face flushed, ignoring her comment about the noises she thought she heard.

“No. I’ll just crash in Matteo’s room.” She threw me a side glance as we walked back in the direction of the dining room and the kitchen. “What?”

I knew that stupid look. “All I’m saying is that you might as well take advantage of him while we are here.” I shook my head at her stupid suggestion. “You always said he was exceptionally good in that department. And you need to get laid.”

I groaned. “Not by him!”

“Well, he’s still your husband so it kinda should be him.”

“Whose side are you on?” I hissed.

“Yours. Of course, always yours. But you have to admit, it makes it convenient to just get sex under the same roof.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “Speaking from experience?” Blush colored her cheeks. “When did you have time to get laid, for Christ’s sake?”

“I make time for it.” Chuckling softly, she added, “Besides, that man is devouring you with his eyes. If you tell him to go down on you, he’d be on you in a millisecond. Oh wait, he already went down on you and you didn’t even ask.”

I smacked her playfully.

“He is not devouring me with his eyes. He’s killing me with his eyes.” Ella got it all wrong. “I swear, you are a freak.”

She laughed harder, nearing the kitchen. “No, you are. I heard those sounds in the hallway. I think there is a fire you are hiding behind your

anger.”

“You are an ass,” I murmured under my breath. I felt heat flame my cheeks.

“But you still love me.”

“Ugh.” She was right, I did love her. Like my own sister. “At this rate, our life will be very short. Maybe you are right and I should take advantage of his presence but ensure I have the upper hand.”

We both entered the kitchen to find all men seated around the table while Maria served them food. All eyes raised up to us. Matteo was already in the high chair, making a mess of himself with spaghetti while he devoured it. Pizza and spaghetti along with gelato and that little guy was in heaven.

“Ah, perfect. I have a plate for you two.” Maria beamed. She loved a full kitchen.

I glanced around. Where in the hell did she expect us to squeeze in?

“God, not spaghetti,” Ella mumbled under her breath. “I thought we left Italy.”

A choked laugh escaped me, and I shoved my shoulder gently against hers. “Stop it.”

“Ella, you sit next to Massimo,” Maria instructed and my best friend promptly turned an intense shade of red. Next time she suggested I sleep with Luciano, I’d suggest she sleep with Massimo. It was probably who she was referring to, anyhow. She always had a crush on him.

“And you, Grace, sit next to Luciano.”

“No, thank you,” I replied quickly. “I’ll sit next to Matteo.”

Matteo was seated in between Nonno and Luca.

“Gees, you need me to move?” Luca teased.

“Either that, or I’ll have to sit on your lap.” Not that I ever would. The words barely left my mouth when Luciano stood up abruptly, his chair falling behind him with a loud thud making Matteo and myself jump. He stared at me and Luca furiously; ready to murder one of us. Or maybe both of us.

Matteo’s crying immediately followed. He wasn’t used to sudden noises and being scared.

“What the hell, Luciano?” I hissed at him, taking Matteo out of his seat. “Hey there. It’s okay. It was just a chair that fell down. See.”

I could feel his heartbeat thundering hard under his chest. Nonno stood up too, soothing him in Italian. I couldn't understand a word he said, but it seemed to work.

"Luca, take my seat," Luciano ordered him, barely keeping his anger at bay. What the hell was this man's problem?

Luca muttered something under his breath, but I didn't catch it. Each grabbed their plates and swapped seats. I caught Ella's pointed look, as if she was telling me *I told you so*. I shrugged my shoulders, half tempted to stick my tongue at her.

"I'm not sitting on your lap either, Luciano," I told him. And damn it if I didn't feel my chest warm up and knew blush spread on my chest, neck and cheeks. I hated that my body temperature constantly skyrocketed around him. "So scoot over and bring me another chair."

"Gees, you two sound like an old married couple." It was Nico that spoke. I narrowed my eyes at him. His tan complexion spoke of his Italian heritage, similarly to Luciano's. Nico appeared clean cut, but I could see hints of ink under his cufflinks. Probably a wolf dressed in fine clothing.

"Would all of you just mind your own damn business?" I wanted to scream at them that we weren't married, we were separated. On our way to getting our marriage annulled. Why in the hell was everyone acting like nothing ever happened? But then I reminded myself of the plan and conversation Ella and I just had.

Everything about this situation was agitating me. The fact that my husband got me all hot and bothered, that he breathed, looked my way and that I was stuck in this situation. But maybe it was a sexual deprivation that made my temper flare up so quickly around him. While I had abstained from moving on with another man, I was certain Luciano had a phone book full of women at his beck and call.

With Matteo calm, I put him back into a highchair and sat myself next to my husband. *Maybe I will use him*, I thought to myself. If my uncle gets his hands on me; I'd be dead. Or wishing I was dead because what they'd have in store for me was worse than death. So, I should have tons of mind-blowing sex and use Luciano for it. Or was I using it as an excuse?

The question was whether I could keep my heart out of it.

Maria placed a plate in front of me. "I remember you don't like parmesan. Little one doesn't like it either."

Maria has been with the Vitale family for a very long time and knew everyone's dislikes and likes. It always amazed me how she observed everything. I never told her I hated parmesan.

"No, he doesn't." It was one of the few things he inherited from me. "Thank you, Maria."

Satisfied that Matteo was back to eating his dinner, I took a bite of my own food.

"Grace, where in Italy did you all live?" Cassio asked.

I chewed up my food and swallowed before answering. "South."

"How long were you there?" He was seemingly just making conversation but he was fishing for information.

"Not long."

"Where were you before Italy?"

"Everywhere."

"Where was your son born?" Luciano questioned me and my head snapped to him in agitation.

"What is this? Twenty questions?"

Silence stretched on while Luciano and I kept our stare down going.

"I love that game," Luca finally broke the tense silence.

"You boys let Gracy be," Nonno scolded them all.

If this situation wasn't so fucked up, I'd laugh at him calling them boys. As it was though, it was impossible to laugh. I didn't want to give them our life story, and everything we've grinded through from the minute we ran off. Yes, I contemplated sleeping with my husband, but I refused to give him anything else. I offered him my heart that day, and he threw it away.

"Luciano, do you have an attorney I could use?" I asked, changing the subject. I gave him a fleeting look and returned my eyes to my plate. I knew he'd question my reasoning so I shoved a spoonful of spaghetti into my mouth.

He scoffed. "What for?"

I slowly chewed up my food, aware of most men watching me. Except for Matteo and Nonno. Those two weren't concerned about tensions between Luciano and myself.

I took a drink of my water and answered, setting down my glass. "So when I kill you and I'm put away, I have a guardian appointed for my son."

I smiled sweetly at my husband and a startling realization hit me. I freaking enjoyed this. I enjoyed bickering with Luciano.

“Well, could you refrain from killing me?”

He didn't seem concerned with my threat at all. Honestly, I was surprised he didn’t throw my uncle’s name in my face for Matteo’s guardian.

“It’s too hard,” I taunted sweetly. “The urge to pull the trigger is too strong.”

Was that regret that flashed in his eyes? *No, Grace. Don’t read into anything with him.*

“And what will you do with the rest of us, Grace?” Cassio asked, leaning against his chair. I almost expected him to reach for his gun. Nonno just winked at me. I guess he knew I didn’t have it in me. “You know, if you kill one of us, you’ll have to kill us all.”

I rolled my eyes.

“That can be arranged.” I had to admit, I have officially lost my mind. Maybe this life and death situation with my family finally fucked up my brain. “What do you think, Ella?” I murmured, seemingly unperturbed.

“I don’t know, Grace.” She never stopped eating. Bringing the fork up to her mouth, she continued. “Let’s wait till tomorrow. I don’t want to go out dancing all bruised up or get blood on me. It’s a pain to wash it off.”

I took an exaggerated sigh.

“And I was so looking forward to ending these guys. Okay, tomorrow then.” I smiled at Cassio and had to hold back my grin at seeing comical expressions on the other men’s faces. The only ones that seemed unconcerned were Luciano and Cassio. “So how about that attorney?”

“What about Ian?” Nonno asked, surprising me. I didn’t know he knew him.

I stiffened at the mention of Ian. He would never be my choice to use; he’d ensure my uncle had a copy and twisted it all into his own favor.

“No, not Ian,” I answered. Nonno nodded, as if he agreed and understood. “I really need one tonight, Luciano. I know how you have people that jump just for you. Can I have one before eight p.m.?”

Two frown lines showed on his handsome face, as if he was trying to decipher me. And unfortunately for me, Luciano was excellent at reading people and figuring out puzzles.

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Chapter Fifteen

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LUCIANO

I studied my wife throughout dinner. There was no doubt; she had spread her wings over the time we spent apart. From the moment I found her, she kept surprising me. The latest revelation about her was hard to reconcile with the woman I remembered. The woman I married. But I realized I loved this side of her too. It would seem there wasn't a side of her I didn't enjoy.

Grace was the Ghost. My Ghost, my runner. Massimo was finally able to penetrate through their firewall and retrieve the email correspondence. Massimo worked through some of her transaction history, and apparently, he still has to break through a few more firewalls, so we could track every single one of her transactions.

She is the fucking Ghost! I was so shocked I couldn't even enjoy the fact my intuition was right when I suspected the Ghost was a *she*.

Right now, my first inclination was to deny her a lawyer without knowing what she needed it for.

It made me uneasy not knowing, especially as layers of her kept unravelling in the short span of two days. But it seemed to be really important to her.

"Sure, I'll have a guy here in an hour."

"Thank you."

She gave me a grateful, soft smile. If she only knew how much power she had over me. She could smile like that and stab me in the heart. And I'd probably let her. Cassio and I still struggled with the connection between their two families.

Belles and mobsters. I scoffed again to myself at that notion. Leave it to the King's ancestors to come up with such a ridiculous concept. What was even more ridiculous was that it worked for centuries.

Self-hatred filled me remembering that day when I pressed the gun to her head. The snowflake on her long eyelashes, love and fear mixing in those eyes. I loved my wife, even back then. From the very first second I spotted her in my nightclub, she had slowly drawn me under her spell. I wanted to hate her more than anything; I wanted to hate her since the moment we first met. I was bitter at the loss of my mother and sister; blaming her right along with her uncle for it. And she fought to escape him and survive.

I wouldn't make the same mistake again. I couldn't blame her for finding someone else and having a child. But now that I had her, and I knew some of the reasons that drove her, I would protect her with all I had. Her and her son.

"So where are you ladies going out tonight?" Luca asked.

"Not sure yet." Grace's attention was on her son, her voice soft and nonchalant, but I knew without a doubt she was lying. Those two knew exactly where they were going.

"You can take my car," I offered. "Your old car is still running too."

There was surprise on her face, but she didn't comment. "Thanks. We'll just take an Uber."

"No, you'll take my car." Why did she have to fight me on everything?

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will."

Her eyes flashed annoyance. "Stop pissing me off, Luciano. I can handle getting transportation."

She returned her attention to Matteo who was done with his dinner and getting crankier by the second.

"Let's go take a bath, buddy," she finally gave up trying to calm him down. "What do you say?"

He rubbed his eyes, smearing spaghetti sauce all over his face. Again, I wondered who the boy's father was. Matteo hasn't asked for anyone else since we left Sicily. I started to think he wasn't in the picture at all.

Grace struggled with the high chair, while trying to keep Matteo from climbing out. "Here, let me help."

I got up and lifted him out of the chair, his chubby hands gripping to my shirt. My heart swelled, causing another crack. The little guy was effortlessly breaking the walls with his small hands. Just like his mother.

Grace chuckled. “You are wearing spaghetti sauce.”

It was her first soft, open expression without any animosity towards me. Maybe it was because I held her son, but fuck it. I was such a sad case, I took it for myself. She leaned over, her hands brushing against my chest as she took Matteo out of my arms.

“C’mon handsome, let’s get you washed up and ready for bed,” she murmured softly. She left the kitchen and Ella hurriedly took her last two bites, giving me a weird look, and then headed out too.

“You are doomed,” Alessio muttered.

I lifted my eyes to find all the men, including my father and Massimo watching me. I raised my eyebrow in a silent challenge. “What the hell are you all looking at?”

“I didn’t say a word,” Massimo commented. “I’m just thinking about the code to break those firewalls.”

“Do it fast,” I spat out, agitated. “Those two are up to something.”

“Who is Ian?” Nico asked out of the blue. My father had a valid question there, and it surprised me she didn’t want to use him.

My father leaned back, so far, he just watched silently. “Ian is the Romano family lawyer.”

“He and Grace were an item before I got her.” I hated the idea of her with him. That guy was a cockroach.

My father shook his head. “No, son. They were not. You have to learn to watch things with a clear mind when it comes to your wife.”

I grunted under my breath. Easy for him to say. Grace had my head spinning and my dick rock hard.

My father chuckled. “Ah, Luciano. You remind me so much of myself with your mother.”

He rarely spoke of my mother since their death. I knew it pained him, so it was surprising to hear him bring her up.

He stood up and headed out of the kitchen. He lingered at the doorway and turned back to all of us.

“Boys, it is time you clean rotten apples out of the mix.” All of us watched him, and for the first time in the past ten years, I wondered if maybe my father didn’t keep tabs on what was going on in our world.

“Together you can end women being traded like stock.” He nodded as if that explained it all, then his eyes returned to me. “Luciano, keep Gracy and Matteo protected. At all costs.”

I fully intended to, starting with her outing tonight.

MY TEETH CLENCHED, THE SOUND OF GRINDING BREAKING THE SILENCE. I watched my wife dance with Ian fucking Laszlo and my fingers itched for my gun. Anger burned beneath my skin, searing the flames to all-time highs. The irrational part of me thundered in my ears, edging me on.

Go ahead and smash his head.

Red crept into my vision, and it took all I had not to smash every single item in Cassio’s office. The dance floor was crowded and each time someone bumped into Grace, she inched closer to Ian. I hated that fucking guy’s guts. My wife looked happy, carefree and beautiful, startlingly beautiful, her hair sparkling like flames even in the dark of the nightclub. The young girl of twenty-one was gone, and in her place was this woman who was sure of herself; she knew what she liked and what she wanted.

Definitely not me. It didn’t matter though. She’d get only what I say or offer. *And she’ll fucking like it.*

Too bad she betrayed me three years ago. We could have been good together, spent the last three years enjoying each other. I still remembered the way she tasted. That attraction the moment our eyes locked. Even after three years apart, it didn’t diminish. It was still there, although Grace ignored it. She no longer wanted it; wanted nothing to do with me.

Point taken, wife. But I’ll be damned if I let you wrap yourself around another man while you are still my wife.

And she would be my wife till death do us part.

“Luciano, you should stop looking.” It was a sane suggestion. Except there wasn’t a single sane cell in my body at this moment.

True to my wife’s word, she took an Uber. Lucky for me, I was able to track her and Ella’s movement via their phones. Massimo hasn’t broken through all firewalls, but whatever he did, it was enough to be able to pin their location. And lucky for me again, she was in Cassio’s nightclub in New York, Temptation.

The unlucky part came in seeing my wife dance with him. That motherfucker Ian. My wife's hands lazily moved from his chest and down his stomach. Cassio was right next to me, watching the scene unfold. Of course, he didn't fume. It wasn't his wife out there on the floor, her skimpy, little black dress making every man in the club worship her with their eyes.

Ian's hands snaked to cup her ass, and I could see him squeeze her butt from here. All kinds of images of me sawing off his hands playing in my mind. I could start with ridding him of hands and then move on to slowly cutting his stomach and removing his guts while he wailed in pain, begging me for mercy. He wouldn't get any.

Watching my wife dancing with Ian spread the boiling rage and jealousy within me like wildfires. Seeing the hands of that prick on her body, his eyes on her. I wanted to gauge his eyes and then torture him for days. Until he couldn't remember her name.

The problem was that he would still remember her. Grace wasn't the type of woman anyone could forget. *I'll kill him*, I thought with finality.

"Are her hands going into his pocket?" Cassio's voice penetrated the red fog and that was it. All my fury unleashed, it took me less than thirty seconds to find myself right behind my wife, on the dance floor. Ian's hands on her ass.

"Wrong girl," I spat out. My fist connected with his jaw, and he went flying across the dance floor.

"Are you fucking nuts?" Grace shouted, clearly furious at me. Yeah, fuck that this pervert just touched my wife. Or that she touched him.

"Nobody touches you," I snapped at my wife. The word *mine* seared into my chest, the word on repeat in my brain. "And if you don't want him to lose a fucking limb, don't touch him either."

I took two steps and lifted the bastard off the ground with my hand gripping his neck while my free hand curled into a fist and connected with the other side of his face.

"We can't have that pretty face be unevenly bruised. Can we?" I gritted out, a dark smile pulling on my lip corners. I landed another punch. "No one touches what's mine. No one looks at what's mine. And Grace is mine, you motherfucker."

Everything around me became a white noise in my head, my only focus on this sleazebag that dared to grope my wife's ass.

Cassio pulled me off the bloody bastard, his face a fucking bloody mess.

“Grace, you and Ella with me. Now!” Cassio snapped at her.

I reached out and tugged on my wife’s hand, pulling her along. In shock, she followed without a question, Ella on her tail. Cassio barked orders to his bouncers to pick up Ian and bring him along too. I would rather leave the fucker on the floor. Maybe punch him a few more times.

Once we were in Cassio’s office, the door firmly shut behind us, I pulled my wife closer to me, inhaling deeply her scent. In her state, she just let me.

“Are you okay?” Her voice was soft, her eyes shifting down my body and stopping on my bloody knuckles.

“He touched you.” She blinked several times, confusion in her beautiful violet eyes. “Nobody touches you but me.” I grabbed her around the throat, pressing gently just so she understood how serious I was. “You touch another man… and you sign his death sentence. I’ll kill any man that you touch.”

Her eyes went to Ella and then shifted to Cassio. “He’s your husband,” he muttered.

“I take it back, Grace,” Ella murmured low, her eyes watching me warily. “You should abstain. He’s fucking crazy.”

Damn fucking right, I was crazy. Jealousy simmered like red rage through me.

“What were you doing with him?” My voice was sharp.

Grace froze and swallowed hard, her gaze guarded.

“I needed something,” she murmured.

To my surprise, Cassio came to her rescue. “Did you take something out of his pocket?”

Her head snapped to him, but she didn’t deny it. “Yes, the keys to his place.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She must have been in a great state of shock to be answering questions without snapping at either one of us.

“Why?” I tried hard to keep my head cool. Despite my age, I had to admit my father was right. I had a hard time thinking rationally around my wife.

She licked her lower lip nervously. “I need a copy of my parents’ will.”

That was not the response I anticipated.

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Chapter Sixteen

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GRACE

I think my husband is psychotic.

And God help me, I might be too because when Luciano claimed me as his in the middle of the nightclub, every inch of my skin warmed and his burning gaze sent a warm timbre down my spine.

I watched in shock, as he used Ian’s face as a punching bag. I didn’t even know he was in the club.

After the lawyer drafted the will, Nonno witnessed it, and Luciano’s attorney assured me it was valid as of that moment. Ella and I rushed to get ready. Yes, Luciano dragged me back to the States, but now I took charge of what I could do. However little that might be. I had to do something, starting with obtaining a copy of my parents’ will.

But this was not how I envisioned our night ending.

I wet my lips, trying to calm my nerves. Luciano wanted to know why I stole Ian’s keys out of his pocket.

“I need a copy of my parents’ will.”

I couldn’t come up with any feasible explanation other than the truth. My husband's bloody knuckles reminded me how brutal he could be. Something deep in my stomach always pulled me towards him. I was a fool to think there was ever a chance of me moving on. The ember of hope, just like that cold January night, flickered, coming back to life.

I should never forgive him. A normal person would never forgive it. Yet, my heart wanted him. It only ever glowed for him, like a damn lightning bug at dusk. And he could squash me like that bug, and still, my stupid heart would only beat for him. Luciano and our son were my whole heart.

His hazel eyes on me were warm, emotions swirling in them that reflected my heart. I stepped towards him, the pull he had over me strong. His clean palm cupped my face, and I wanted nothing more than to press my face into his chest.

“You were going to break into his house?” Disbelief and amusement danced in his eyes. I nodded and thought I heard him mutter, “What happened to my sweet Grace?”

My lungs tightened and my heart constricted in a strange way. It was a reminder not to let him hurt me again. There was no mistaking it; I never got over my husband. He would eat me alive, and next time, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to pick up the fractured pieces of my heart.

We only live once.

That was the dumbest justification ever.

“Luca could do it.” Cassio’s voice interrupted the world where only Luciano and I existed. I blinked in confusion, wondering what he was suggesting. I had completely forgotten about him and Ella. “Luca could go into Ian Laszlo’s house and get the will. He can break into any safe.”

Ella and I shared a glance. Neither one of us thought about a safe.

“Grace, let Luca do it.” Luciano’s tone was commanding, and my instinct to fight him flared up. “He’s one of the best when it comes to that stuff.”

“We don’t know how to break into a safe.” Ella must have picked up on my intent to argue with Luciano. “Might not be a bad idea,” she murmured.

She was right. It was actually a very good idea. I extended my hand and opened my palm, showing the key I had taken from Ian. My palm had an imprint of the key dug into it, from the sheer force of my squeeze, protecting a possible key to my future.

“It has to be done tonight,” I muttered, meeting Cassio’s whiskey gaze. “And we have to return the key before he goes home.”

Cassio immediately sprang into action. He phoned Luca, and he was here within five minutes, along with Massimo. It made me think he lurked somewhere in the shadows of the nightclub.

“I’ll go check on our fallen fighter and keep him busy,” Cassio commented and left the room.

“Massimo, take Ella back to the house,” Luciano ordered. “I’ll bring Grace back. Take the safe route.”

I glanced Ella’s way to ensure she was okay with that plan. She must have been because she was already making her way to Massimo.

With everyone gone, Luciano and I were left alone.

I chewed on my bottom lip, forcing myself to meet my husband’s gaze. “You shouldn’t have lost your temper like that.”

He seemed unconcerned.

His hand slid to the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair. Right now, I was happy that I decided to leave it down. I loved his smell and the strength of his touch. Our gazes locked, our lips inches apart. His thumb brushed across my lips. My pulse raced, my need grew.

“We should clean up your bloody knuckles,” I whispered. Because I was scared to say anything else.

I felt tension rolling off Luciano for the next hour, while we waited for Luca to get back. But it wasn’t an angry tension. More like anticipation of something that was to come… between us. I sensed his eyes on me, tracking my every move and every breath. My skin itched with that same anticipation. The one that would unravel me in the best way possible but could also destroy me with its invisible hold.

Cassio returned from checking on Ian and sat in the room with us. I learned this nightclub was his. Talk about an odd coincidence. It was probably how Luciano ended up here and saw me dancing with Ian.

“Have you heard from Luca?” I have been pacing back and forth, wondering what took Cassio’s brother so long. Ian’s place was right around the corner.

“No, not yet.” Both men’s gazes were on me.

“And Ian?” I questioned.

“He’s still here,” Cassio responded, leaning back into his seat. I could clearly tell by Luciano’s look and posture he didn’t give a damn about Ian. “Slightly woozy after the meds he received.”

“You drugged him?”

“Just a small dose of a sleeping aid.”

“That’s good,” I agreed in a raspy voice. I couldn’t feign wrong doing when it was something Ella and I contemplated ourselves. Hell, we even talked about killing him.

Luciano sat manspreading on the couch, his eyes boring into me while his arm rested behind the head of the couch. He looked comfortable, not a

single worry on his face. I, on the other hand, kept worrying about everything.

I chewed on my lip. “Did Ella get home safe?”

“Yes.” He almost looked bored sitting there. Didn’t he realize shit was happening? I wondered what was going through Luciano’s head because I couldn’t read that man to save my life. Maybe it was exactly that which made him a good mobster.

I resumed my pacing again.

The office door opened, and Luca strode in. I rushed to his side.

“Oh, were you worried about me?” he teased me.

“No. I was worried about you finding the right documents.”

I didn’t notice it till now, he had a manilla envelope in his hands. “You mean this?” He raised the folder, waving it in front of me.

“Did you read it?”

“Yes.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “That fucking safe he had was something. Took me longer than usual to break into it.”

Thank God he went. He handed me the envelope, and I grabbed it eagerly. Pulling the papers out, my eyes scanned through it.

“So how long has your uncle been stealing from you?” Luca’s question had me pause and lift my eyes to him. Truth was I didn’t know, but I suspected probably from the moment he became my guardian.

“We have to return the key to Ian,” I answered instead.

“Done.”

With a nod, I strode to the chair in the furthest corner of the room and started reading. Zeroing on the date, I raised my eyes to find all three of the men watching me. “Was this the only will and only copy?”

A smile tugged on Luca’s lips. “You want this one too?”

He pulled another manilla envelope. I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I want everything you have taken that has to do with me.”

“Woman, you do not want to know all that,” he retorted. “Besides, it would have required a damn file cabinet to get all that out of there.”

I sighed. “I should have gone with you. Can I have it?” I extended my arm. “I assumed you read this one too?”

He handed me the folder and then leaned against the window. Luciano was the closest to me, Cassio directly across me and Luca on my right.

“I did. It reads the same with the exception of the guardian and power of attorney designator.”

I pulled that document out, skimming through the key sections and my eyes widened. “What the-”

How could that be? That document designated Luciano’s father as my guardian and executor of all my inheritance. My eyes darted between lines, my brain flabbergasted at the revelation. Did Luciano know? Did his father? I didn’t know they knew my parents.

And that’s when I found it. The loophole. I quickly dug the latest document that designated my uncle as my guardian and searched out the same paragraph.

“It’s still there,” I murmured to myself. Ian made a mistake and left a loophole in both documents.

“What is?” Luciano’s question startled me.

My head snapped up, my eyes darting between the three men.

Luca answered him. “The loophole.”

I nodded. “Yes, the loophole.”

“Well, you two are at an advantage. You have read both documents. Can you summarize it for us?”

Luciano didn’t like to be in the dark.

“Did you know?” I asked him, watching for any signs of deceit.

“You will have to be a bit more specific,” he replied, a frown on his face. “Did I know what?”

I shook my head. “The original will by my parents had your father as my guardian and executor of the inheritance.”

The expression on his face told me he didn’t know it. “Are you sure?”

I handed him the will while my brain worked furiously. There was so much I didn’t know. How would I ever find out all the secrets with my parents gone?

“Why didn’t he ever say anything?”

“Are you going to exercise the loophole?” Luca asked. He turned his gaze to Cassio. “She doesn’t get her inheritance until she turns twenty-five. Unless-” he paused, I guess for the special effect or something. “Unless she gets married. How is it that you didn’t know this?”

“I never received a copy of the will. I was twelve when my parents died.”

“Hasn’t Ian told you that?” Luciano asked in a growl. “He’s your attorney and should be looking out for you.”

“No, obviously he hasn’t,” I replied bitterly. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have to resort to stealing it from him. He only serves my uncle’s interests, in case it escapes you. Ian is my uncle’s lover, has been for a while.”

Luciano’s expression was comical. “What? You sure?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I’m sure. They have been an item behind closed doors for a long time.” I didn’t have to wonder what my husband was thinking. “And no, Luciano. He never dated me. Both Ian and my uncle needed a diversion, someone to cover their relationship.”

He didn’t comment further. Not that it would matter whatever he thought. His eyes went back to my parents’ document.

“You are worth quite a penny,” Luciano muttered, his eyes darting the pages of my parents’ will.

Apparently, not enough. Because my husband threw me away.

There was no time for bitterness or regrets. I didn’t care about the money, but it was obvious my parents didn’t want my uncle or my grandmother to get their dirty hands on it. Not that I could blame them considering what they were doing.

I could transfer it all into Matteo’s name. If something happened to me, he’d be taken care of. The will I have put in place already designated him or any future children I might have, which I won’t have any, as my beneficiaries.

“Grace, let me help you.”

Luciano’s offer startled me. I forgot about all of their presence as I worked out a plan in my mind. I didn’t trust him, any of them. After all, they were criminals, and I could still feel the press of the cold metal pushed against my temple as he was getting ready to pull the trigger.

Yes, I wanted him. Craved him even. My heart belonged to my husband. But I wouldn’t be that naive girl that believed he’d take care of me anymore. I couldn’t rely on anyone but myself and Ella.

So, I’d use him. His resources and his mind.

“I need your lawyer again,” I said, my mind made up.

He pulled out his phone and dialed his contact.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Cassio asked.

I shook my head. I wouldn’t dare ever trust a King with anything. Cassio and Luca King must not know about the Romano belle arrangement. Otherwise, they would have taken me to their father at first sight. I trusted them even less than Luciano. After the beating Luciano had given Ian, I was

inclined to think maybe he wouldn't let them take me and sell me to the highest bidder.

Besides, I was already married. So what good would I possibly do them? Those belles supposedly were auctioned off to marry high ranking and the richest mobsters of the world. *Or do other things,* I thought with a frozen fear.

Yes, I had to transfer everything I owned, including my parents' inheritance to Matteo. So if I fell into their clutches, they couldn't put their dirty paws on something that belonged to my son.

"Giuseppe is on his way."

"Thanks."

"You are going to keep us in the dark, aren't you?" Luca asked.

Yes.

"None of this has anything to do with any of you." *Liar.* "Thanks for your help, though, in retrieving the documents."

I sent a note to Ella, knowing she'd be worrying.

One loophole.

We always kept our text messages short. Her reply was thumbs up. Twenty minutes later, Luciano's lawyer entered with one of the club bouncers. "Laszlo is gone," he informed Cassio and Luciano.

"Mrs. Vitale, twice in one night." Giuseppe didn't seem upset to have been dragged into a club in the middle of the night. He probably did it often. It also didn't escape me that Luciano noticed I didn't correct the man for calling me by my married name.

"Sorry about that," I muttered. "I'd like to have all my inheritance transferred to Matteo's name." I handed him both copies of the will, aware of all three men's shocked gazes on me. "The executor and power of attorney should have been removed a while back."

I watched as his eyes roamed the pages. "If we could do it as soon as possible, that would be ideal," I added.

"Going somewhere, wife?"

I ignored Luciano's question.

"I can have it done first thing tomorrow morning," he glanced at his watch. "Well, this morning when offices open," he continued, chuckling. It was a little past midnight now. "I'm assuming the guardian you appointed earlier remains unchanged?"

I nodded. "That's correct."

He gave me a pensive look. “Will there be problems with Mr. Laszlo?”

“Ian Laszlo will not be a problem,” Cassio chimed in, surprising me. “He will probably spend the next two days recovering from a major hangover.”

Perfect. I wouldn’t ask any questions. Ian chose his side when he started working with my uncle, against my well-being.

We worked out a few more details, and Giuseppe was on his way.

“Well, I’m going to get going too,” I told them tiredly. I headed for the door, glancing over my shoulder. “Thanks for your help. You guys enjoy the rest of your night.”

Luciano actually chuckled. “You are not going anywhere alone. I’ll take you home.”

I rolled my eyes noting amused expressions on Luca’s and Cassio’s faces. “I am quite capable of going places alone.”

“I am sure you are, but I’ll be taking you home regardless. And stop rolling your eyes.”

I rolled my eyes again, just to make a statement. Although my lips curved into a smile on their own, with a stupid excitement at challenging him. Maybe I got off at challenging him. His big arm wrapped around my waist as he nudged me out of Cassio’s office.

“Good night, you two. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Luca mused.

“Or maybe you shouldn’t do what my brother would do,” Cassio drawled, with a grin on.

“Whatever.” Those two totally had the wrong idea. *Didn’t they?*

Then why did I feel this longing ache between my thighs?

Luciano’s arm around me, we walked through the nightclub, glances thrown our way from all corners. He didn’t pay attention to anyone but me, his steps rushed. Like the club would be set on fire at any second.

“Slow down, Luciano.”

The moment we were outside, his body pressed against mine, cornering me against the wall. He had a gun underneath his sophisticated Brioni suit, ruthlessness dressed up. He might have looked like a businessman, but he was a cobra ready to strike.

His body pressed against mine, his heat seeping into every pore of me.

His lips were barely an inch from mine, when he rasped. “Next time I see any man touch my wife, I’ll cut off each one of their fingers,” he

growled. “One. By. Fucking. One. And then I’ll slice their hands. After that, I’ll gut them. Nice and slow.”

I watched the burning inferno and fury in his eyes. He had always been possessive; but this was a whole new level. Desire pooled between my thighs. My body shouldn’t be reacting this way. My lips parted on their own, a rush of blood ringing in my ears. I was turned on, unlike ever before.

“I-I was just dancing,” my voice was breathless. I nervously licked my lower lip. “I needed to get that will.” *Why was I justifying myself?* “Besides, I’m practically not your wife anymore.”

Even as those words left my mouth, I pushed off the wall, wanting to feel every ounce of his body flushed against mine.

He groaned and pressed his pelvis against my lower belly. He was hard, his cock straining against his pants and now against the thin of the dress material.

“Does this feel like you are not my wife?”

Oh my God. My chest would explode any minute. I had no idea how my hands found themselves under his suit jacket, my palms against his chest. My head swam with desire, drunk on it.

The moment I felt my husband’s mouth on my neck, a loud moan escaped me.

“That’s right,” his lips moved over my overly sensitive skin. “You are mine.”

His lips left a trail of the sweetest searing sensation. He nipped; he kissed; he licked. I felt his hands on my ass, pulling me harder against him.

“Luciano-” My voice was breathless, slutty. I didn’t care. I wanted my husband. “Please.”

“Ahm, sir,” a voice came from the distance but I didn’t care.

“Don’t stop,” I begged, my hands fisting his shirt in my grip, pulling him closer.

He sucked on my neck. “Fuck, you smell good.”

“Sir?” The same voice again.

Luciano raised his head, my eyes watched him through heavy eyelids. I felt drunk, but it had nothing to do with alcohol.

“Get lost,” he ordered.

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from him. I didn’t want to come to my senses. It would be stupid, and I’d regret it tomorrow. I’d regret it for the rest of my life. But right now, I needed him like the air I breathed.

I'm using him. That was it.

"He's gone." He led me to his car that someone pulled in front of the club and sat me into the passenger seat.

The throbbing between my legs was unbearable. I needed the ache to go away. I watched as Luciano got behind the wheel, put his McLaren into drive, all the while painfully aware that I needed this ache to be gone.

I have pleasured myself for the past three years. And right now, I was so tempted to do the same. I must have lost my mind because the fact that Luciano was next to me driving, only excited me more.

I shifted in my seat to ease the ache. It made the throbbing worse. My heart raced; my body needed his hands on me. As if he read my mind, his hand reached over. He put his palm on my thigh, slowly pulling the dress up till his palm rested on my skin and a needy whimper left my lips. My hand covered his big hand, and I placed it over my pussy.

"Fuck," he groaned, his eyes burning into me. "You are fucking drenched."

"Pull over, Luciano." My voice was raspy, breathless, needy.

It took him ten seconds to take a sharp turn off the main road into the closed alley and put his car into park.

He reached for my seatbelt, unbuckled it and grabbed me by my waist, hauling me over onto his lap. I shifted so I was straddling him. My mouth clashed against his. His lips tasted of liquor and him. The taste of him that I've been craving for the past three years. My lips parted, and he accepted the invitation by plunging his tongue into my mouth, conquering it. Moans escaped my lips, getting swallowed by this man that shattered me to pieces.

I ground against his hard shaft. His hand tightened on my hips as I kissed him, hungry, frantic. He consumed me. Every single emotion within me shook with overwhelming need for this man. His hand cupped the back of my neck as he sucked on my tongue, kissing me hard.

I moaned into his mouth, my fingers pushing through his hair, all the way down to his nape. God, he smelled divine, tasted even better. Like cognac, citrus, and a woodsy cologne. Same as before.

I rolled my hips, friction between us making me gasp. A shredding sound reached through the haze in my brain. In shock, I realized he tore my panties off of me. Before I could even process that fact, his finger touched my clit and every single thought fled my mind. It was only him, in every single cell, every single breath.

“Mine,” he hissed. “Say it.”

He felt amazing.

“Luciano, please.”

He thrust a finger inside me, and my hips started moving against it. My blood ignited; my body burned with every touch he gave me.

“So wet,” he groaned. “Say you are mine.”

“Oh God.” I moved against him, grinding against him. This was so much better than my own touch while I fantasized about him. I never came close to this high. “Yes.”

He pulled his finger out, his other hand came to my hip and his fingers dug into flesh, willing me to still. My eyes shot open and our gazes locked. Our breathing was the only sound in the car and as I watched him through heavy eyelids, he brought his finger to his sinful lips and licked them clean.

“Fuck, you taste amazing,” he rasped. “Just like my wife.”

My breathing hitched, and my ears buzzed with desire and blood pumping through my veins. My hands went to his pants. I lifted my butt off of his lap just enough to unbuckle him. The sound of the belt, followed by the zipper and our labored breathing vibrated within the car.

He still didn’t wear boxers. My hand wrapped around his cock, and his head fell backwards.

“Grace. Fuck, yeah.” I pumped up and down, watching him with hunger. I bit into my lip, to stop moans from leaving, the sight of him erotic. He threw his head back, the look of pure bliss on his face. I wanted to taste him, to see if he tasted as good as I remembered. The ink on his neck tempted me. I licked my lips and his hand cupped the back of my head, pulling me hard to him.

His teeth nipped my jaw, then his lips ran up my neck before pressing to my ear. “You are mine. Say it.”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Say it, wife.”

“I’m yours.”

A groan rumbled from his throat, then he grabbed my hips and slammed inside of me, filling me to the hilt. A scream of pleasure pierced through the interior of the car, and it was mine.

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Chapter Seventeen

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LUCIANO

Seeing Ian dance with my wife made me want to shoot the motherfucker and get rid of him forever. But the beating I gave him would have to do. For now. It seemed my father was right; I was blind when it came to Grace. Finding out that Ian was Alphonso's lover was a major surprise.

But right now, none of it mattered. Only my wife in my arms, her pussy around my cock. I would never let her go. Annulment was a bullshit excuse. I'd make her love me, stay with me. Forever.

"I'm yours." Her soft voice and her moans were an addiction. She was my addiction. I thrust inside her, my fingers digging into her soft flesh. It was home; she was home.

She froze, and I instantly followed suit. "What's the matter, Tesoro?"

Fuck, I hope I wasn't too rough and hurt her.

"We need a condom," she breathed.

Resentment swam inside my chest. I was her husband. How many men did she put a condom on? I pushed the thoughts away. She was mine. She told me she was mine. I'd make her keep that word for the rest of our lives. I was hers and she was mine, from this day forward.

"No." I thrust up into her again, the heat and tightness gripping my cock. Her head fell into the crook of my neck, her moans she tried to hold back right at my ear. "You are my wife."

I pulled her dress straps down. They fell off her slim shoulders, exposing her strapless nude bra, and I reached behind her to unhook it. Her full breasts at my full view.

“Luciano, we need a-”

“You are my wife,” I repeated and bent my head to take her nipple in between my teeth. I tugged on it with my teeth, and a sharp cry escaped her. I grabbed her hips once more, moving her hard on me. She ground against me, up and down, her clit against my pelvis. Her moans became louder with each pump.

I was so close to exploding. I gritted my teeth hard, wanting to ensure her pleasure before mine. She disarmed me, stripped away all my fucking reason, and she wasn’t even trying. You’d think I was a teenage boy having his first fuck. Because this was what my wife did to me every single time. Every time with her was better, new, and all-consuming. She was my storm and my calm. She had the power to tear me to pieces.

“Luciano, I’m so close,” she moaned, against my lips.

I reached between our bodies and rubbed her clit, her body grinding against mine, her tight pussy around my cock.

“Ask me to come inside you,” I demanded, my voice rough. Her moans were loud, her breathing labored. I watched her pale skin flushed through heavy lids, and she looked like a goddess riding my cock.

“Ask me,” I groaned, ready to explode.

“Please come inside me.”

Another thrust and she exploded around me, her insides clenching around my cock and her moans in my ear. With a heavy groan, I followed her right over the edge. I forced her to move against me, to prolong the high, this fucking feeling I missed for the last three years.

I buried my head in her hair, my hand against her chest. Under my palm, her heart thundered hard, just like mine.

My heart beat followed hers, beating only for her. Just like my life was only hers.

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Chapter Eighteen

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GRACE

I woke up with a warm body pressed against my back, a man's strong arms around me. In Luciano's bed. I slept with my husband. And had sex. Numerous times. My body was enveloped in the sweetest exhaustion. And my heart… oh my heart!

My heart melted. With every word he whispered last night, every promise he gave and every endearment he called me. Some I understood; others I didn't.

I was a fool to ever think I could just use him for sex to sate my craving. It was always so much more with Luciano. I tried to put up my walls after our fling in the car. I really did. Then we got home and he pretty much swooped me up into his arms and strode into the house, his mouth colliding with mine. Then straight through to *our* bedroom. Like I was his new bride. Just like he did all those years ago.

"Luciano, stop it," I whispered softly, never ceasing my fingers as they trailed across the keys of the piano. His warm mouth trailed soft kisses along the back of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. Yet my neck tilted on its own will, just slightly, in order to accommodate him better. It has been like this with him since the beginning. My body always accommodated his touch, needing it. "We've been married for a month now. We aren't newlyweds anymore."

My fingers continued to caress the keys, tunes of Gnossiennes No. 1 echoing softly through Luciano's empty house. I always loved music. It was something I inherited from my mother. This has always been one of my favorite melodies, the memories of my childhood warmed my chest. I'd be

sitting by the fireplace with my father as I watched my mother play, her graceful fingers moving over the keys with practiced ease. She was an opera singer, but she loved to play the piano.

This grand piano that Luciano had was just as impressive as my mother's. Although for as long as we've been married, I never heard anyone play. I wished my mother's piano was here. It was part of our family for generations. Part of the Astor legacy.

"I want to fuck you now, Grace." I felt his lips move against my skin, his breath searing my skin. "On this piano. I want to bury my cock deep inside you."

The music stumbled, my fingers tripping over the notes. I sensed his satisfied smirk, though I couldn't see his face.

"You want that too," he rasped.

His body pressed against my back. My core heated with his words, my panties drenched with the insatiable desire he seemed to constantly feed. It wouldn't take him long to strip me naked. I only wore one of his button down shirts and panties.

In one smooth move, his hands gripped my waist, then lifted me up and sat my ass on the black shiny surface of the grand piano. The cold surface under my ass sent shivers through my lust sizzling body. Our eyes locked, his gaze full of heat and hunger. For me. My body responded without any thoughts needed.

I spread my legs slowly, my core welcoming him. His hands roamed down my hips, to my thighs. The shredding sound of my panties filled the night. By now, I was used to Luciano's passion. There wasn't a flash of panic when his hands roughly handled my body. Instead, my body had been responding to it. Just like now.

The heady, slow burn of arousal flickered through every inch of me. It felt like a growing fire, spreading uncontrollably.

My eyes never wavered from his face, watching every flicker of emotion on his face. His hazel eyes burned from within with the same fire I felt in my veins.

The cold piano under my ass was such a contrast to my body's inferno. His finger dragged through my folds, exploring.

"You're drenched." A groan tore through his throat and every fiber of me vibrated to his words. "For me."

It didn't matter how many times he touched me; each time felt new, better with him. On its own will, my body arched up against him as I watched him under my heavy eyelids.

His fingers slammed into me and a loud moan vibrated through the room.

"I fucking love your sounds," he groaned. I barely had time to draw a quick breath before his other hand fisted my hair, and his mouth crashed down on mine, angling my head for deeper tongue penetration. His kiss was hard, demanding, and my legs hooked around his waist.

"Take the shirt off," he rasped. "I want to see every inch that belongs to me."

In rushed movements, I obeyed his command and in seconds I sat naked on his piano, waiting for what was coming next.

He stepped closer to me, both my thighs wrapping around his waist. His body pressed against mine, his mouth moving down my neck, to my collarbone, then shoulders. When his mouth reached my breasts, he licked and sucked on my nipples until I was panting.

God, I couldn't wait to feel him inside me, feel his hot skin against mine. His rough, callused hand gently pushed me to lay back, the cold surface of the piano cooling the skin on my back.

He kissed his way down my stomach until he reached my pussy. His fingers pushed deeper inside me, then out and thrust inside again. My hips rocked against him, my head whipped from side to side. I closed my eyes, flying high, relishing in this sensation.

"Keep your eyes on me, Tesoro," he commanded in a hoarse voice. I opened my eyes and seeing my husband between my thighs nearly unraveled me.

My back arched off the piano as he pinched my nipple with his other hand.

"Please, Luciano," I begged.

"What do you need?" He knew what I needed. Nobody was ever so in tune with my body as this man.

His mouth reached my pussy, he was so close. The anticipation was killing. I wanted his mouth on my sensitive folds. I ached for him there.

He must have taken pity on me because I felt his teeth scrape over my clit just before he sucked on it.

A delightful shiver rippled through my body. "Ohhhhh."

My fingers intertwined through his hair, his soft strands a familiarity I never wanted to give up. His mouth was merciless, licking and sucking my pussy; his finger working in and out of me. He devoured me, sucking hard on my clit and thrusting his tongue inside me. My insides quivered, reaching higher and higher for the peak. The overload of sensation caused me to yelp, my body withering away from him. But my husband's hands clamped on my hips, forcing me to hold still till my body came apart.

"Fuck," I screamed as an orgasm rippled through me and white lights flashed behind my eyelids.

Before I came down from my heights, Luciano lifted me off the piano, turning me over while planting my feet on the ground.

"Bend over and brace yourself," he demanded hoarsely.

I barely followed his command, placing my palms flat against the piano, the cold surface against my chest sending goosebumps through every inch of my heated skin. He made quick work of getting rid of his pajama pants, his hands gripped my hips and he drove into me from behind, my body still shivering with the orgasm. One deep thrust through my clenching pussy and I was ready for him. Every fiber of me was so in tune with his needs, just as he was with mine.

"Don't ever forget who you belong to," he growled.

He pounded into me, his grunts mingling with my whimpering moans. The sounds of piano notes penetrated through my sex-drenched fog. With each plunge of his, my body pushed against the keyboard, creating a note in tune with his thrusts.

"That's right," he groaned. "You are mine." He thrust into me again, hard and deep. The sounds from the strings resonated through the room as he fucked me hard, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh in tune with the deep notes. The pure sensation of fire and my love for him melted into liquid gold as another volcano erupted.

I pressed my mouth against my hand in an attempt to muffle my screams. Luciano's own roar followed right behind me as his cock pulsed inside me, spilling his release. I felt his strong body pressed against my back and any rational thought evaporated, leaving only the passion for this man.

The music notes created by our bodies pressing against the keys ended, our bodies sated, and every single piece of me fluttered away, straight into my husband's arms.

As I took a deep breath, I tried to shift when he scooped me up into his arms.

“What are you doing?” I gasped at his sudden movement.

“I’m carrying my bride over the threshold of my bedroom.”

I should have known I had fallen for him that day.

Luciano’s big body stirred behind me, his arm tightening around my waist. God, it felt good having his arm around me, but it was stupid. I shouldn’t have succumbed to my desire for him. Yet, my body didn’t mind at all. I was relaxed and sated more than I have been in years.

I risked glancing over my shoulder and found my husband sound asleep. His sharp features were still striking, even in his sleep. But there were also traces of a gentle boy he once was, before he became a ruthless and dangerous man. His dark hair fell over his eye, and I knew it was soft as silk. Our son had the exact same hair color as his father. God, I wanted to twist around and wrap my arms around my husband, touch his hair, his inked skin. Make him mine. But I didn’t want to risk waking him up. And truthfully, he wasn’t mine. Not really.

Most of the night what we’d done was intense, rough, like two starving humans that haven’t experienced touch in far too long. I preferred that to the gentleness. His softness and tenderness would break me. After all night of starved and greedy sex, he took me into the shower and tore down every inch of my wall.

I was grateful for the shower sprinkling water all over my face. Because what we had done felt damn close to love making. The water from the shower hid my tears that escaped, rolling down my face at hearing my husband murmur words of love as he slowly slid in and out of me.

Slowly wiggling out of his warm, strong grip, I grabbed my panties and one of his shirts. Before leaving, my gaze traveled over his muscled body. Ink covered so much of his skin. Sleeves of ink painted both of his arms and hands, his chest and torso had magnificent tattoos that I could spend days studying. My eyes lingered on his chest and then I saw it, and my heart skipped a beat.

It can’t be.

Leaning closer, that was when I saw it. *Sola Gratia. By Grace Alone.* The tattoo over the left side of his chest. He didn’t have it before. How did I not notice it the morning Matteo fell asleep against him? Was there a meaning to his tattoo? It could mean nothing.

Yes, it is probably better not to read too much into that.

I tiptoed towards the door, softly opened the bedroom door with a silent click and snuck out of his room like a thief, then rushed to Ella.

Before passing by Matteo's room, I checked on my son. Still in a deep sleep, his hair fell down on his forehead in exactly the same manner as his fathers. I reached out, brushing it off his forehead gently. My son has been my heart from the second I felt him move inside me. Living without Luciano shattered my heart, but living without Matteo would break me. I had to ensure he was safe; regardless of the cost. To me or anyone else.

Leaving his room, I continued towards Ella's room. We ran into each other ten feet from her bedroom door, she was coming from the opposite direction. Wearing someone else's shirt. Massimo's, if I had to guess.

Our eyes locked, both of us in a state of undress. She gave me a sheepish smile.

"I guess we both had a wild night," I muttered, shaking my head. It would seem both of us were stupid.

"But what a night," she replied wistfully.

With a soft chuckle, although somewhat coated with bitterness, we both entered her room.

"I thought of something," I told her. I wouldn't grill her about Massimo. She'd tell me if she needed to talk about it. It was the same with me. That was what made us great friends. We trusted each other and always listened when the other needed to vent. But we never asked, pried or demanded to know it all.

"What?"

I pulled her into her room and we sat down on her bed before I started.

"My grandmother usually holds her annual gala every year. It is supposed to be tomorrow. What if we made an appearance there? Grandma and Uncle usually never miss it."

She frowned. "Yeah, I remember, but what good would that do?"

"We could take him and her down there."

The silence followed, our gazes locked. We had never killed; I never thought I'd hurt another human being. It wasn't me but if it came down to them or us… well, it had to be them.

"I'll do it," I murmured. My family had taken so much from me. But even with all that knowledge, the thought of killing them didn't come easily. "But that's not going to fix our problem in full though."

“What do you mean?”

“Even with them gone, that agreement of selling me still stands. It has been standing for centuries. Same is true for your parents’ agreement for you. My uncle might have ruined your family, but he sold that agreement to Benito King.”

“What are you saying, Grace?”

Heartbeat of silence.

“We have to kill all the Kings.”

“Are you suicidal?” I understood her hesitation. After all, the King family has been known for their cruelty, ruthlessness and bloodthirst. “We’d have to kill them all at the same time; otherwise, they’d hunt us down. And Grace, they wouldn’t just kill us.”

I watched her expression, fear coloring her features. She was right. They wouldn’t just kill us. They’d make us regret ever being born. The word was they tortured their enemies for years.

“I know,” I murmured. “But what other way could we ensure they never get their hands on us?” I took a deep breath in and then slowly exhaled. “Gabriella, if they get their hands on us, we are dead anyhow.”

“Fuck.” I agreed with that word exactly. Either way, we were fucked, and we’d have to go into a lifetime of hiding. My heart squeezed painfully at the thoughts of not seeing Matteo every day. It made it hard to breathe. Surviving the loss of Luciano was hard. But I wasn’t sure if I could survive losing Matteo.

But he’ll be alive. Luciano will ensure his safety as soon as he finds out he is his son. Matteo’s safety was all that mattered. I wanted him to grow up into a man… a good man. Hopefully, Luciano would respect my wishes not to pull him into his criminal world.

“What about Cassio and Luca King?” Ella questioned.

“What about them?”

“Well, they are the Kings too.”

I frowned. It crossed my mind too. I didn’t know what the deal was with them. How come they didn’t know about the standing agreement between the Romano and the King families? I was certain they didn’t know. Otherwise, they would have hauled my ass out of here the second they saw me.

“I don’t know,” I told her honestly. “They are Benito King’s sons, but it is like they don’t know anything about all this.” We couldn’t waste time

wondering what their deal was. “We should probably kill them too.”

Ella’s face portrayed shock. “What if they are innocent?”

“And what if they aren’t, Ella?” I retorted.

“They seem close friends with your husband,” she murmured. “And those five men, including your husband… I don’t think we are a match for them.”

“I know. But what do we do if they decide to enforce the agreement? They are the Kings after all.”

“Jesus, we had dinner with them.”

I blinked at her justification. “So, we should let them kill us because we had dinner with them?”

Rolling her eyes, she smacked my arm playfully. “That is not what I am saying. But maybe we should consider they might not be connected to their father. I mean, you grew up under your uncle and have no connection to him. Maybe they are similar.”

I took a heavy sigh. “Fine, I’ll give you this one. Can you hack into their communication and see what the deal is with them? I don’t think we are a match for Cassio and Luca King anyhow. If their relationship with their father is similar to mine with my uncle, we’ll let them live.”

Ella chuckled, her eyes twinkling. “I swear, woman. You sound bloodthirsty, and we haven’t killed a single person yet.”

“I don’t really like the idea of killing anyone. But I really don’t want to be sold to some criminal.”

“I can tell,” Ella muttered. “You are still trying to get over your current one.”

“I am totally over the current one.”

“Right.”

“What does that mean?”

“Why don’t you just admit you are not over him?”

“I am!”

“No, you are not. Maybe your husband is not over you either.”

“Now you are just talking stupid,” I spat back “He was never into me, so there is nothing for him to get over.”

“Right, that’s why he beat Ian like some mad man… in the middle of a nightclub.”

“Why are we talking about him? We have this life and death situation over our heads, and we are debating whether Luciano is or isn’t into me.

When we are dead, do you really think in the grand scheme of things it will matter?”

“You think we won’t get out of this alive?”

“We’ll damn well try.” I observed her fidget with her hands. She was acting funny. “Gabriella, what the fuck is the matter?”

“Well, I kind of want to get out of it alive. I like Massimo. Like a lot.” I frowned. It was the first time she said those words out loud. “I know you don’t like him. I don’t like Luciano for what he did to you. But I’m willing to give him a chance. Can you do the same for Massimo?”

Pushing my hands through my hair, that was still a mess from my tumbling last night with my husband, I looked at her incredulously.

“Sure, Ella. You know I love you, and I want you to be happy. However, I’m not asking you to give Luciano a chance. Both of those assholes pointed their guns at me.” I watched emotions flicker over her face. “Besides, thinking about Massimo while we have the King family hunting for us along with the Romano family isn’t the right thing to do right now. ”

She exhaled in resignation. “I know, I know. But I’m tired of running. And I just know it will be worse this time. It was hard watching you last time, and your pregnancy was what helped us both get through. It was the only thing that drove us. What will we have this time?”

I blinked hard, several times, the sting of years burning in my eyes. “We can’t bring Matteo along. It’s too risky. Luciano will make sure he is safe.”

The heavy admission clenched my heart. From the moment Luciano found us, running without Matteo was what I dreaded the most. My husband had set things in motion by dragging us all back.

“You have everything ready so he knows he is his?”

I nodded, unable to get the words out.

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Chapter Nineteen

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LUCIANO

"What the fuck happened here?"

Cassio's and Luca's grim expressions told me nothing good. This warehouse should be filled with their shipment of guns and drugs. Yet, it was empty. It almost felt like déjà vu from that day when my location was hit. But my wife didn't know about this shipment.

This shipment was meant to fool Alphonso and Benito into thinking Raphael was on their side, working with them. And it was all gone, not a single product in sight. There was no time to arrange for a new one and there was never a plan to deliver a shipment of women. *We are fucked!*

"Goddamn father of mine," Cassio gritted, trying to maintain control. I offered to let him use my warehouse in Jersey, but he felt confident his father hadn't gotten wind of it. "Fucking greedy asshole."

Benito King ruled New York, but barely. The only reason he maintained his position was thanks to Cassio and Luca. But those two had enough. Now they worked for themselves. Their father fucked them over enough.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Raphael Santos. "Hey buddy."

"Fuck," he chuckled over the phone. "I am almost there. But I have a feeling you want something pronto."

I chuckled back. Lucky for everyone, I was in a good mood after last night. Yes, my wife was gone when I woke up this morning but her delicate smell was still all around me. Even on my crisp, white button-down shirt and black three-piece suit. She must have brushed against it when she went into my closet, because I could smell her lingering perfume all around me.

“Benito King intercepted a shipment that was coming to the city. Do you have anyone that can run it down? But instead of bringing it back to the city, take it to Jersey. My favorite place.”

“Sure thing. See you in five. I’ll have an update for you then.”

That was the reason I liked doing business with Raphael. No delay, no questions. He knew we didn’t deal in flesh, so that was all that mattered to him.

I met Cassio’s thunderous gaze. He was still fuming about what his father did. Luca kept playing with his knife, throwing it up into the air and catching it. One of these days, that motherfucker would cut his finger off. I really liked him, but he had to stop playing with knives.

“Raphael might be able to seize it.”

“Thanks, Luciano.”

“Don’t mention it. You’d do the same for me.” Cassio has been my best friend for a long time, and I knew he would do the same for me. In fact, he had done the same for me multiple times. When I needed backing against the Romano family for killing my mother and sister, he and Luca were there with me.

We stood in silence. I knew Cassio needed to simmer down his rage. We were similar in that aspect. When we lost our shit, we really lost our shit.

Luca, despite his happy-go-lucky bastard attitude he had most of the time, had similar rage issues when he lost his shit. My rage started when my mother and sister were murdered. Cassio and Luca’s much earlier on. Their sick, bastard father was to blame.

After a while, I broke the silence. “It might be time to take the East Coast.”

His gaze snapped to mine. He knew what I meant. His father shouldn’t be the ruler of New York. There wasn’t a single man that currently ruled the East Coast. Yes, his father wanted to, but he’d never succeed. Nico, Luca, Alessio, and I would never work with him. Same was true for Raphael Santos who owned Florida and Vasili who ruled New Orleans.

“We have too much shit going on now,” he muttered.

“We’ll always have too much shit going on.”

“Why are you in such a great mood?” Luca drawled, a smile on his face. He finally stopped flipping his knife. I had to give it to him; he knew how to control his rage. “Someone got lucky last night?”

I grinned. “None of your fucking business.” I would never discuss private details about my wife with any man, although I knew it was hard to hide that shit went rather great last night. After I beat the crap out of Ian Laszlo. “I’d back you up if you decide now is the time. Benito is a loose cannon. He has been from the moment he stepped into your grandfather’s shoes. Your Sicilian roots, your mother’s father backing along with Nico, Alessio, Luca, Raphael, and I… Fuck, even Vasili Nikolaev would be onboard to help. We could take the East Coast.”

I knew he wanted to. He has been working on it for years, moving the chess pieces slowly, undetected by his father. I could practically hear the wheels spinning in his head. Cassio hated unnecessary death, but the fact was in this world, there would always be death. None of us were saints; it just happened that some of us were worse than others. And Benito King was the worst of us all. Men that willingly followed him were no better.

“Might be time, brother,” Luca chimed in. He had no desire to rule the East Coast. Truthfully, neither did Cassio, but he refused to work for his father. Because the thing was… his father didn’t work with anyone. He insisted on everyone working for him.

Never. Gonna. Happen.

And it wasn’t as if we could be completely out. Like they say, the only way out was death.

“Just think how many lives we could actually save,” I justified. “The entire coast would be ours. No human trafficking on our turf, from Alaska, Canada, all the way down to Florida. Fuck, even Louisiana with Vasili.”

His pensive eyes watched down the docks and over the horizon. He knew I was right. We could have a good thing going. Yes, gun and drug dealing were bad. But it wasn’t forcing women and children into fucked up situations. Truthfully, I wanted out of this business. Money laundering, all of it. But with Cassio as the head of the East Coast, it would be a partnership, and we’d control it all. I knew from an early age what my father did. So did Cassio. My grandfather ran a similar operation alongside Cassio’s and Luca’s maternal grandfather in Sicily. It was the reason we were so close, the three of us.

“No need to answer now,” I told him, hearing Raphael’s car engine pull up. “Think about it. I’m with you either way.”

Raphael strode in. I shook my head. That damn Columbian always looked like he just came off the runway, or a magazine featuring the top

CEOs. He wore a white three-piece suit and against his tan skin and dark hair, it didn't look too shabby. It almost led you to believe he wasn't a threat. Almost.

"Hey, pretty boy." He flipped me the middle finger, and I chuckled. Yes, maybe I was in a great mood today.

"Well, this pretty boy has a surprise coming for you guys."

"What's that?" I teased him. "A Gucci suit?"

"My boys already located the stolen shipment. We killed all the men, but left one alive. My present to you."

I shook my head. Raphael was an important asset to keep. "You are a fucking hunter. I knew you'd get them."

"Fucking right!"

I glanced at Cassio. "What do you say, Cassio? Want to question our *suspect?"*

"Yes, I think it is time we make some changes around here. Let's teach our *suspect* who owns the East Coast."

"Fuck yeah!" Luca muttered.

Raphael grinned. He wasn't part of our conversation, but he knew the end game. Benito King had to go.

"Is he coming with the shipment?"

Upon his nod, we all loaded into our vehicles. I sent Roberto to go check on the status of our runners that cleaned money through my casinos in Atlantic city. I had several guards at the house watching over the women and Matteo along with my father.

Massimo was with me and he was currently outside. He had some shit to take care of with the technology he upgraded at the compound along with every business I owned. Massimo is one of the rare men I trusted implicitly. If he changed anything about our security, I never questioned him.

We all loaded into multiple cars. Cassio, Luca, Raphael, and I each had three men with us, along with two vehicles each. That way, if we were attacked, it was harder to get to us.

We took the route of the Brooklyn Bridge. I remembered the first date I took Grace to. I told her we would dine at a restaurant in the city. Her first request was whether we could take the Brooklyn Bridge route. It was her favorite way into the city. I was suspicious of her request and had taken five vehicles and extra men along with me. But the moment the car drove onto the bridge, she straightened up and stared out the window, the whole world

forgotten. She loved to look over the river. A month into our wedding, I finally asked her what was so special about it. It was always the same view.

Her smile as she turned those beautiful violet eyes to meet my gaze shone on her face.

“My parents met on the bridge when they were kids,” she admitted. “Makes me remember.”

I didn’t ask her to elaborate, but I should have. Maybe I would have learned a thing or two about my wife. The bloodthirsty need to avenge my mother’s and sister’s deaths, and fighting the attraction I felt for my wife, ate at me back then. I made a lot of mistakes when it came to her, and I intended not to repeat them. She’d give us a fresh start, a chance. She had to; I wouldn’t take her refusal. It would be Matteo, my wife, and me.

Another ten minutes and we pulled up to the port I owned in Jersey.

This was good. No incidents, no trouble.

“I think we got it all,” Raphael’s brother-in-law, Sasha Nikolaev, spoke up. “We got them while still on the boat, before they were able to dock. At least I was able to use my new sniper rifle. I left you one guy to play with,” he smirked. His pale hair and pale blue eyes made him look very much like his oldest brother. Except Sasha’s temper was more off the hook than Vasili’s.

“Thanks, man.” I pat him on the back. “We owe you and Raphael.”

“Just put it on the tab, pretty boy,” Raphael’s voice taunted from the back.

It was my turn to flip him the bird.

“Okay, I’m out,” Sasha chimed in, flipping us both a middle finger. “I got some ***personal*** business to attend to.”

No doubt that meant there was a target on his list. Sasha and his half-brother, Alexei Nikolaev, were two of the best enforcers.

We all strode into the warehouse. All Cassio’s products were already offloaded and ready to go.

“I have two more men heading this way so we can move the product,” Cassio explained. None of us held on to our product long, especially not in one place. When Benito King was after it, we moved it even faster. Regardless that this was a setup shipment for Alphonso, we operated in the same capacity. Not to mention that Alphonso and Benito tried to fuck us over, many times over the years.

The man sat tied up to a chair, his wide eyes darting between us all. He was probably trying to decipher the weakest one of us to the strongest. He'd not have much success. He got himself into a pile of shit, probably wishing he was dead right now.

The four of us stood in front of him, all our suits impeccable. "Fuck, I really didn't dress for the occasion," Raphael muttered. "I love this suit."

"Dude, you look like you are a virgin," Luca joked. "Who wears a white suit?"

"All the badasses." Raphael reached under his blazer and pulled a gun out. "Can we just shoot him so I can keep my suit white? Or did you have something else in mind?"

This was how we played with the fuckers.

I shrugged. "I was thinking maybe we start with pulling his teeth, with a set of pliers. There is one set around here, I'm sure." I pretended to look around, as if I was seriously searching for the tool. I turned my head at Luca. "Hey, you have a knife. Can you just start with an eyeball?"

A whimper had all of us directing attention to our guest. "What was that, fucker?" I taunted. "You'd like us to start with an eyeball?"

"N-no."

I yawned, pretending boredom. "Gentlemen, we have to speed this up. I got a date later today."

"Let's start with a finger," Luca suggested, as he threw his knife up into the air and caught it easily.

Massimo stepped behind the guy and held his hand out, gripping it tight. "Better not get his shit on me," he warned, grinning devilish. Massimo was just as fucking crazy as I was. "My girl and I are having dinner at a fancy restaurant."

"Look at you two fuckers," Cassio groaned. "Can you stop bragging about your love lives?"

"Someone definitely got lucky last night," Luca chuckled, still flipping his knife into the air.

"I got lucky last night too," Raphael chimed in, grinning. "So, it leaves only two unlucky bastards."

"That's it," Luca growled in pretense. "I am getting lucky tonight."

"Well, let's get lucky and cut this guy's finger off," Cassio retorted. "Unless, he wants to tell us who he works for, and why he stole my shit."

"I don't know who hired me."

“And here I thought we could finish today’s business on a high note,” I feigned distress. “Cut it.”

He tried to resist but it was futile. Massimo was stronger than him and held him still. Luca pressed his knife against his middle finger and cut it straight off while blood gushed all over. I guess he won’t be flipping anyone off. Not that he would get out of this alive.

His screams echoed throughout the warehouse. You’d think we cut off his entire hand, not just a finger.

“Who do you work for?” I asked again, seemingly bored to death.

He pressed his lips together, his refusal to answer. I nodded at Luca. “Cut the other middle finger too.”

Yes, I could be a sick and crazy fucking lunatic.

“Maybe we should just do the entire hand?” Cassio suggested. He looked pensive, as if he seriously weighed the pros and cons to it. “Yes, I like that better.”

Massimo grabbed his other hand and held it still. “You get your fucking blood on me, I’ll bring you back to life just so I can kill you again,” he growled.

I guess nobody wanted to get dirty today.

“King. Marco King!” He pretty much screamed the name.

“Awww, man. Your little brother.” Cassio hated Marco as much as his father. Those two were made out of the same kind of evil. They raped and tortured women for pleasure. Both of them heavy into human trafficking.

“He wanted the shipment and the woman is next,” the pathetic fucker cried out.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

“What woman?” I growled. I had a bad feeling that I knew who the woman was.

“I don’t know,” he whined. “He bragged she’s a fucking descendant from some kind of royalty. All I know is that she was promised to him for a while. She is a natural redhead, and he’s into redheads.”

It was Grace; I had no fucking doubt. The cold rage and fear snaked through me. Marco King wanted Grace. “Kill him,” I spat.

Massimo stepped away, then Cassio reached for his gun and fired one bullet.

He slumped forward in the chair. Three seconds of silence. “Yes, it’s time to take the East Coast,” Cassio acknowledged.

“About fucking time,” the rest of us muttered in unison.

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Chapter Twenty

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GRACE

I sat on the property's private beach. Ella was back at the house, trying hard to find out information about the unknown cousin I had. I didn't hold out much hope that piece of information would help us. Though it remained to be seen.

I watched Nonno and Matteo play in the sand; Grandpa sat in a beach chair while Matteo shoveled sand from left to right and then right back. Such a simple act, but it filled my heart with longing. I remembered spending time with my parents at our beach home in Connecticut. They always made time for me, helping me build castles in the sand.

All I wanted was to keep Matteo safe, to see him grow up to become a man. Now, I wasn't so sure if I'd succeed. As messed up as everything was and after everything Luciano had done to me, I still had no doubt he and Nonno would keep Matteo safe. But I really wanted to be part of my son's life. I just didn't see any other alternative. There were only two options - run or be killed. Living on the run wouldn't be a good life to offer anyone, much less a child.

And I really didn't want to get killed. Despite my conversation with Ella earlier today, the chances of us succeeding in killing my family along with Benito King and his descendants were slim. We weren't criminal masterminds, and we certainly weren't killers.

The yearly fundraiser my grandmother held would be our chance to get closer to my uncle and grandmother. But the problem was, I didn't know how to go about killing them at such a public event. Or maybe that would be where we set the trap. Both my grandmother and uncle had guards

protecting them, but if I could somehow get them alone, I'd have a chance to get rid of them. I had to find a way. I worried about the threats at Matteo's life, now that they knew about my son.

I looked back to Matteo and his grandfather, building a tower. Well, Nonno was building it. Matteo was probably just digging a hole.

A tower.

"Come here, Grace." My father's voice travelled across the sand dunes, his voice carrying on the wind, along with the sounds of waves washing across the shoreline.

"Coming." I ran towards my parents, my feet feeling heavy as each of my bare feet hit the sand. I loved the feeling of sand on my toes but running in it was too hard for my little body. Occasionally, I'd trip and fall into the sand. At least the sand cushioned the fall.

When I finally reached them, I threw myself into my mother's arms. She was beautiful. Her soft smile and voice always made everything better.

Lifting me up into her arms, my dad leaned over and placed a gentle kiss onto my forehead.

"I have a story to tell you, my little Grace."

"I'm not little anymore," I objected, on a pout. "I turned five yesterday."

"And you are such a big girl," my mother cooed. "But you will always be our little girl. Always our baby."

I didn't like their explanation back then. I didn't want to be a baby anymore. It was only after I had Matteo that I understood those words. God how I missed them! They were torn from me, and the moment I lost them, I had been thrown into the Romano's greedy clutches. Yes, we shared the last name but my uncle and grandmother were nothing like my father and mother. They were nothing like Grandma and Grandpa Astor.

"Look, Grace," my father's voice had me follow this finger pointing to our beach house. I eagerly stared but couldn't grasp what he was pointing at. "Our beach house used to be a tower many, many years ago. Your great-great-grandfather Astor bought the tower and built a house around it."

I stared wide-eyed at the house. "Where is the tower now?"

"Remember where you and Mommy always sit to watch the boats come in?" I nodded eagerly. "That used to be the highest part of that tower."

"That used to be my favorite part when I was your age too," my mother chimed in a soft voice.

“Did Grandma read you stories there?” I asked eagerly. “Just like you read me stories.”

My mother’s soft chuckle filled my ears. “She did. And guess what?”

“What?” I whispered, eager to know everything.

“Sometimes, we would sneak out of there through the secret passage. We’d go to the beach and watch the sunset and Grandpa never even knew.”

I giggled. “You fooled him.”

“Yes, we did. The secret passage is a good hiding spot and lets you sneak out without anyone ever knowing. It is our family secret.” I stared at my parents wide-eyed, eager to know how to find the secret passage. “Want me to show you?”

I nodded eagerly and insisted on seeing it right away. It became my favorite part of the house.

Family secret. That was my Mom’s family's only secret. Too bad they never had a chance to warn me about the many family secrets on Dad’s side.

Matteo’s laugh pulled me out of the memory, and I watched the scene in front of me with a smile. He was happy, loved it here. I wasn’t sure how that would work out, but there was no chance I wouldn’t try to eliminate the threatening shadows lurking over him. I might not have a daughter, but Matteo might have one in the future. This wasn’t only about saving my son or myself. It was for his children and grandchildren too.

Okay, step one. Eliminate uncle and dear old grandma. Step two, eliminate Benito and Marco King. Possibly Cassio and his brother too. It was what would probably end me. I was no match for any member of the King family. Contingency step two, if eliminating the King family turned out to be unsuccessful, Ella and I run. Alone.

Alone. Even that word by itself hurt. Neither Ella nor I wanted to be alone. We wanted a semblance of normalcy. It has been so long since we had it. And more than anything else, I wanted to raise my son. Just thinking about a life without him made my lungs burn with each breath I took.

If I could find a way to make that damn agreement null and void, maybe I’d come out of it alive. Both Ella and I. There was no way that something like that was legal. I had to scoff to myself though. It wasn’t as if men in this world did much by the book.

I mean, just look at me and my husband. He kidnapped me, married me, made me fall in love with him, and then pulled the trigger. Who would have

ever thought that one shared moment of locked gazes across the dark nightclub would get us here?

Gabriella and I stood at the bar of the nightclub. We had just graduated, both of us alone. No parents, no family to witness, just the two of us. But the point was we graduated. We had each other.

The bar was crowded and neither one of us was good at pushing our way through. So, we waited patiently until it was our turn to order.

"I hope it's worth the wait," I yelled to Ella, rolling my eyes.

My eyes scanned the room. We haven't even gotten our first drink and there were women already stumbling all around. This club was one of the newer ones and completely redone. It has become one of the hit clubs to visit and be seen at. Neither Ella nor I cared about being seen, so we hadn't been here yet.

The black crystal chandelier hung over the extravagant bar, accenting the red marble countertop as well as the booths surrounding the space.

Someone bumped into me and I almost lost my balance, my whole body shooting forward when a pair of man's hands wrapped around my waist to steady me.

"Shit." I hated crowds. And drunk people that acted like jerks.

"You alright?"

A deep man's voice against my ear had me turning my face towards it, and that was when I saw him.

The beautiful hazel eyes shattered me the moment our eyes locked. And then he slowly started putting me back together, only to shatter me again three months later.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you." My heart pounded under my rib cage. I swore he must be able to feel it, because it was exactly where his hands were.

Against his jet-black hair, his eyes were more prominent, more green than hazel. The five o'clock shadow on his sharp cheekbones and those beautiful, full lips made me want to trace his face with my fingers.

Everything about the man that I met that night, my future husband, made my muscles tense and go rigid. I wasn't sure if it was a warning of self-preservation that I ignored or awareness. Did my body recognize the man that would bring me the ultimate pleasure? Or demise?

One kiss.

One night.

It was a hard and fast falling.

Yes, I bickered with him and fought him once I found out he was using me for his revenge. But at the same time, I craved him. The taste of the passion he gave me that first night, I wanted it every night.

Luciano was my ultimate vice. Probably my ultimate destruction. Whatever drove him the last time to kidnap me and force me into marriage, it must still be there.

“Gracy, what are you thinking about?” Nonno’s voice startled me. I was so deep in thoughts I didn’t even notice him approaching me. I met his gaze, full of concern and softness.

I wondered why Luciano’s father never mentioned he knew my parents. Or that he was meant to be my guardian. How did they know each other? And why didn’t Luciano know? He and his father kept no secrets between the two.

My eyes sought out Matteo. He was still in the same spot, slowly taking down the tower. Just as I intended to do.

“Can I ask you something?” I turned my gaze back to Nonno. He had never given me reason not to trust him. Unlike Luciano, his father had consistently been kind and welcoming. Even more importantly, he had been honest.

“Of course.” He must have expected a long discussion because he sat himself next to me.

“How did you know my parents?”

“You too, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Luciano asked the same question.”

“Oh.”

“Your father and I had a common goal. It was to stop Alphonso Romano and your grandmother from human trafficking. But then we became friends. My wife and your mother got along well, and obviously your father and I.”

My father and Luciano’s father were friends. He must have trusted Nonno explicitly if he designated him as my guardian. More than his own family. Two such vastly different backgrounds, yet they were friends. Luciano and I had different backgrounds too.

Except, Nonno didn’t point a gun at my father’s head. Luciano did, however, point it at mine.

“Your father was a good man, Gracy.” I knew he was. Both my parents were great people.

“I know,” I murmured low, my eyes locked on my son. “I just wish they didn’t leave me so clueless. You know?”

In a blink, both my parents were dead. And I knew nothing of what awaited me. I went into it blind, trusting and came out burned. By my uncle, grandmother, and finally Luciano. They all used me.

“He wanted to protect you.”

“He should have made me stronger.” My voice cracked. “I walked into all of it blind and-.”

I couldn’t finish the sentence. The memory of those dark days when I had to endure my uncle and grandmother screamed in my mind. I pushed those memories out of my mind. I couldn’t go there now.

“Your parents loved you,” Nonno’s voice was soft.

“I know.” I turned to lock eyes with him. “Did you know Mom and Dad made you my guardian?”

He nodded. “I did. And I went after him when he took you. It was your parents’ wish to keep you away from them. I wanted to honor it more than anything. But I lost.”

Somehow it felt like Nonno lost a lot because of it.

“Was it really an accident?” I knew the official story. I’ve read the newspaper but I suspected there was more to it.

“No, Gracy.” Nonno sounded tired. “It wasn’t an accident. He went against your uncle and his mother. I helped your father. I didn’t want women trafficked in my territory. Or anywhere for that matter. We fought them together. Your uncle retaliated with the help of Benito King. It ended up costing us a lot. You, me, and many others.”

I was scared to ask, but I needed to know.

“Nonno, what did it cost you?” I whispered. I had a feeling it would be a revelation that might change our dynamics forever.

“It cost me my wife and my daughter.” A gasp escaped me. My hand reached out and took his wrinkled big hand into mine. Luciano lost his mother and sister to my family. No wonder he hated my guts when we first met. No wonder he kidnapped me to use me as his leverage.

“How did they die?” On one hand, I didn’t want to know. But it was time I learned.

“My wife and I took our daughter out for her birthday dinner,” he explained, sadness evident in his voice. “Luciano got held up with his casino business. I thank God each day he wasn’t there. When we left the restaurant, we were cornered. My men assigned to protect us were already dead. I didn’t have my gun on me. Lucia, my daughter, didn’t like guns or violence. Alphonso’s men shot my wife and daughter in front of my eyes and there was nothing I could do. I fought them but one man against ten wasn’t a match. Your uncle watched it all from his car, the window rolled down, smoking a cigar and drinking a beer.”

I took his hand into mine and squeezed it. I couldn’t even imagine the pain he felt. You never get over something like that. It was impossible to get over something like that. His tone of voice was heart wrenching; to have witnessed your daughter and wife murdered in cold blood like that was unfathomable.

“I’m so sorry, Nonno.”

“You have lost your parents. We all have lost something.”

I kept my hand over his. He was right, we all lost a lot.

“He killed Ella’s parents too,” I muttered the admission. “Her father refused to work with him when he realized Alphonso was using him to smuggle women. So he killed them both.”

“I know,” he replied. “Her father was a crooked politician but he had limits. Sometimes I worked with him, but after losing my wife and daughter, I wanted nothing to do with the business. Luciano took over and he built his own way of doing business. Only with people he explicitly trusted. And all the while he went after your uncle and grandmother, to make them pay. But he didn’t know I started it all when I refused to let Alphonso into my territory, working with your father. What tipped your uncle into pure violence was that I refused to give you up.”

“You should have,” I rasped, the tears stuck in my throat. “It cost you so much.”

“And it cost you a lot too,” he replied. “You suffered under Sophia and Alphonso Romano. Your parents wanted you to be safe and protected.”

Swallowing hard, I couldn’t help but feel guilty at Nonno’s loss, my parents’ loss. All because the King family wanted a fucking Romano belle for their auction.

“I miss Mom and Dad,” I choked the words out. “It never goes away, does it?”

Nonno’s other hand cupped my one cheek. “No, it doesn’t. But we have Matteo now. We have a future in front of us. You, Luciano, Matteo.”

I swallowed hard.

“And you too,” I rasped.

He chuckled softly. “I’m an old man. I will be joining my wife and daughter sooner than you and your husband. And definitely sooner than our little Matteo.” I glanced at my son, his concentration on the sand. He had a big grin on his face, and the breeze shifted his curls onto his forehead.

I would make sure my son has a chance to grow up without the threat of the Romano family. My uncle and grandmother had to die. Anyone that threatened my son’s life would be eliminated.

“I hope you stay around for a long time,” I told him. “To see Matteo grow up.” Because I wasn’t so sure that I’d live that long.

The sound of seagulls above us and waves rolling off the shower mixed with Matteo’s enthusiastic babble, while Nonno and I both sat lost in our own memories and regrets. At least I had those. Wishing Nonno hadn’t tried to do the right thing so his wife and daughter would still be here, among the living.

“What are you thinking, daughter?” he questioned me. “With such sorrow on your face.”

“It kills me that my family hurt your daughter and wife just because you helped my dad,” I rasped, finding it hard to look at him. Guilt slowly spread through my chest that he lost two important people in his life because of my fucked up, cruel family.

“No, Gracy. There were more reasons.” He turned his gaze towards the horizon, the beautiful view lost to the bloody memories. “Luciano grew our territory and our fortune fast. It made Benito King and Alphonso Romano jealous. Your uncle wanted to use New Jersey and Connecticut along with New York to move flesh. Luciano intercepted all their shipments and freed women. I told Benito and Alphonso we would never allow it to happen. So for a long time, they searched for a way to eliminate the Vitale family. It started with killing your parents, continued by intercepting my guardianship of you, and ended with the death of my own wife and daughter.”

So many lives lost just for the greed of two men. “We should kill them,” I muttered under my breath.

Nonno’s sad chuckle startled me. “Oh, my little Gracy. This world has hardened you.”

He had no idea.

NONNO'S WORDS PLAYED IN MY MIND ON REPEAT. SO MANY DEATHS AND suffering caused by the greed and cruelty of my uncle and grandmother. Yes, I had never killed anyone but those two surely deserved to die. I never thought I'd consider killing a human being but those two… I wanted to kill. The need to see them suffer and get what they deserve choked me. I guess this was what they called thirst for revenge.

They killed my parents.

They killed Luciano's mother and sister.

They killed Gabriella's parents.

How many more lives did they take? How many women suffered a cruel fate because of them? All that blood was on their hands. And without a doubt, I knew they'd try to use my son if it worked in their favor.

Uncle and Grandmother *had* to be eliminated.

I felt tired, drained, maybe even a tad bit cranky. Past and bitterness would do that to you. Though activities from last night when I ended up in my husband's bed probably contributed to that too. I couldn't even say I regretted it. I was more than a willing participant. But after learning that my uncle killed Luciano's mother and sister, I finally saw what should have been evident the moment we met.

We were never meant to be.

It took less than a half of a week for my entire world to become a big, tangled mess. The threat of my uncle loomed over my head, the belle agreement of my family with the Kings was a noose around my neck, and I had no solid plan. Yes, kill evil old Uncle and Grandma but the question was how. And then, how would I ensure I didn't end up in prison? I mean, these people killed all the time and they got away with it! Mobsters must take some lessons somewhere along the way on how to get away with crimes. I need that damn book… *Get away with crime for Dummies.*

I scoffed in my head. It didn't take a genius to see that even if Ella and I got lucky and succeeded in killing my uncle and grandmother, the chances of us killing Benito King were slim to none. He had soldiers and

mercenaries guarding him and Marco King. And then on top of all of it, we still might have to run because we'd be criminals. Fugitives.

At least I'll have a job with the Ruthless King. Yes, it was all about priorities.

If I could only think of a trap. A safe trap for Ella and I, so we could kill them all. Because just like Ella, I'd like to live a bit longer. I'd love to see my son grow up.

And damn it, if I could enjoy my husband's bed for a bit longer, that would be a nice plus. Even if he agitated me most of the time. Like now.

Luciano got it in his ass that we should have a formal, family dinner. We were in the dining room that could easily seat a hundred people. It was just the nine of us. Ella sat next to Massimo, Matteo between Luciano and I, his father on my right, Cassio next to Nonno, Luca, Alessio, and Nico split between my side and Nonno's side.

It couldn't be my luck for Luciano to just take his friends and Massimo to have dinner out. But no, it almost felt like he was including Ella and I in his small circle. I just wanted to eat dinner with Matteo and Ella in peace, without watching out for any possible landmines in our conversation. Like in Italy, before our whole life got uprooted.

"Grace, I hear you studied music." Cassio started small talk.

"Yep."

"Do you sing or play an instrument?" Nico asked curiously.

Ella and I shared a glance. We were both on the edge and tense, waiting for some bomb to drop. She was irritated that finding out information on Uncle's offspring proved to be elusive and was scared that at any second, we'd be dragged into the auction, sold to a cruel mobster.

More and more I thought about it, I was certain that killing my uncle and grandmother, then living on the run might be our only viable option.

"Piano," I retorted curtly, aware that my one word responses made this situation worse. I just wasn't in the mood for chitchatting and pretending everything was great while Ella's and my lives hung by a thread.

"Where did you study music?" Nico Morrelli asked. He eyed me curiously. I learned he was the mobster that controlled Maryland and Washington D.C. In fact, among all the men at this table, they controlled almost all of the East Coast. I heard them reference Raphael Santos, and I knew from overhearing my uncle's conversation that the Santos family

controls Florida. If Raphael Santos was Luciano's friend, then that must mean that my uncle lost his Florida connection too.

"Juilliard," I told him briefly. I had a feeling they all knew everything about me and Ella, so not sure why they bothered making conversation.

"Well, you are a chatty Cathy," Luca chimed in.

"If you want to talk," I spat back sarcastically, "-be my guest and talk away."

"How come you two parked yourself in Sicily?" Cassio asked, ignoring my sarcasm. "Especially knowing that Luciano's ancestors and my ancestors came from Sicily."

Matteo shoved the spoon full of spinach that I attempted to feed him out of his face.

"First of all, how in the hell would I know where your mother's ancestors are from. Second of all, haven't you ever heard of the term *hide in plain* sight? And I never told you where we parked ourselves. Which tells me you already know it all so I'm not sure why we are bothering with questions."

Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock. Okay, so maybe I was the landmine ready to explode at any second.

"How would you know my mother's family is from Sicily?" Cassio questioned. That man was sharp.

"The King family is from the Welsh area in England," I answered him as Matteo kept pushing the spoon away. "Therefore, I assumed you must be talking about your mother's family."

"It was good you went there, Gracy," Nonno interrupted, giving me a comforting smile. "Where was our Matteo born?"

I knew Nonno hoped he was born in his hometown, or the one of his wife. The way he took to Matteo made me painstakingly aware what my son was missing. Nonno and Luciano were his family, just as Ella and I were Matteo's family. "In Italy, not in Sicily." I kept my answer short and returned my attention to my son.

"Come on, Matteo," I begged in a strenuous voice. "Just a bite."

"No. no," he objected, turning his face away from me.

I felt on the edge of my seat waiting for another bomb to drop. This felt like living in a mental battle zone for me. I had to keep my guard up at all times. Yes, at night I tumbled between the sheets, but that only impacted my heart and body. This was so much more.

“What have you fed him?” I asked Nonno, cranky.

“We just had gelato for a snack when we came back from the beach but that was hours ago.”

“How many hours ago?” I gritted, my nerves like a rubber band, ready to snap. We were happy in our little town on an island in Italy. Our whole life got interrupted in a matter of a week. At this point, Matteo basically demanded only gelato - for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And now I was having dinner surrounded by ruthless mobsters.

“Maybe an hour ago,” he replied, a guilty expression on his face.

I dropped the silverware with a clunk, everyone’s eyes snapping to me. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath in, then exhaled. I reached for any ounce of patience I could muster. It was nowhere to be found.

“I’m sorry, Gracy,” Nonno must have sensed I was teetering on the edge. Him calling me Gracy didn’t help at all. It reminded me even more how happy we were in Italy, and now we were here facing danger at every corner. I had no solutions and was tempted to beg someone, anyone to help us. But the people at this table were the reason we were in this predicament.

Well, except Nonno.

I swallowed hard, reining in all the control left within me. *Don’t lose your shit. Don’t lose your shit.*

“Let’s go get a bath and then bedtime,” I told my son, placing the napkin onto the table and got up. I’d changed into white jeans and an emerald green t-shirt for dinner. I refused to go all out for these men, but both Ella and I agreed, we shouldn’t show up to dinner wearing yoga pants. Although it was awfully tempting.

I kicked off my high heels, ready to pull Matteo out of his high chair. No sense in strutting around the house in high heels. I wasn’t a trophy wife.

“Here, let me try,” Luciano offered. Before I could object, he picked up Matteo’s fork and continued, “Okay, Matteo. I know veggies are kind of gross. But let’s dip them into the sauce, and it makes them taste better.”

“He doesn’t like to mix his food,” I told him but just as the words left my mouth, my jaw just about dropped. I watched in amazement as Matteo accepted a forkful of green beans dipped into sauce and chewed. I waited, holding my breath. He would spit it all out any second.

Any moment now.

My son swallowed it and then grinned at Luciano. “Più,” he demanded. *More.*

I shook my head in disbelief.

“Little traitor,” Ella called out softly.

Everyone around the table chuckled, and I shook my head. Completely unexpected evening. I caught Nonno’s look, watching his son and grandson. Deep inside, I knew without a doubt that Nonno knew Matteo was a Vitale. He knew he was looking at his grandson.

Decidedly pushing that suspicion away, I glanced at Ella. It didn’t escape me that Luciano’s friends observed Ella and I for any and all movements. Like they were studying us.

I sat back down. Taking the glass of wine off the table, I took a sip.

“Whatever. As long as he eats.” I leaned back into my seat and watched in amazement. “Yep, you can feed him for the rest of dinner. I’m taking a break.”

Luciano’s and Matteo’s eyes raised to me, the identical mischief in them, and my heartbeat got stuck in my throat. Father and son. Luciano actually winked at me.

“We’ll show her how good we eat. Won’t we, Matteo?” Luciano murmured softly to his son, and suddenly my heart twisted in agony. He would be a good father. Just not a good husband, because he hated the Romano family. I couldn’t even blame him. “Then you’ll grow big and strong. Sì?”

Matteo grinned and nodded eagerly.

I blinked hard. Shit, not a good time to get teary eyed. I was scared to even think what Luciano would do, if he knew Matteo was his son. *He’ll find out soon either way.*

I had to settle my nerves. Taking another sip of my wine, my eyes traveled to my best friend. The expression on her face was one of disbelief too.

“I guess you were wrong, Grace,” Ella announced. “Luciano is good for one thing. Feeding toddlers their veggies.”

I felt heat rushed to my cheeks. I glared at her. Why would she say something like that? The table chuckled, but it didn’t escape me that Luciano’s eyes were on me, although I tried to avoid his gaze.

“I could remind you a few more things I am good at,” he offered.

“No, thanks,” I answered quickly.

I’d have to talk to Ella about traitors. What was she trying to accomplish with that comment?

The rest of the dinner was quite uneventful. Luciano and his friends talked about their casino business, nightclubs, and stuck to neutral subjects. Ella and I mainly observed rather than commented. Not that we shared much of anything with these men.

Well, except for laundering money and trying to kill a few individuals. But those were forced circumstances for the two of us.

Before dessert, Luca got a text and left soon after. Nico and Alessio followed shortly after. I kept waiting for Cassio to clear out, but he remained behind. He made me nervous. He tried hard to appear non-threatening and that made him even more dangerous. I knew Ella felt the same. We felt like we were in the middle of a vipers' nest, among all these mobsters.

How many of these men participated in the belles and mobsters' arrangements?

I caught Ella shifting uncomfortably again, and my eyes trailed back to her. We understood each other well enough for me to know she would make an excuse. I nodded, understanding her completely.

"I have some stuff to take care of," she mumbled. "Thanks for dinner."

She didn't even wait for an answer but rushed out of there, Massimo on her tail. She told me he has been questioning her about what we had done for the last three years. Digging for information. He was an idiot if he thought just because she slept with him, she'd divulge any information. Although it made me regret she had to keep her guard up. She deserved happiness.

My eyes lingered on Matteo, now happily eating gelato since he ate all his dinner. Would he remember me if my uncle got his hands on me now? Probably not. He was too young. My parents were killed when I was twelve, but at least I had those twelve years of memories. Twelve years of complete, sheer happiness.

"You know Grace," Cassio's voice interrupted my gloomy thoughts. "Not all of us are bad."

"Huh?"

"We might run the underworld, but we aren't all bad."

I regarded him pensively. It was an odd statement to make. Was he trying to tell me he knew about the arrangement my family had and disagreed with it? Or he disagreed with human trafficking in general? Or something entirely different?

“Okay, so tell me who is bad and who isn’t?” I asked him.

His lips turned into a smirk.

“It wouldn’t really matter, would it?” He stood up from the table. Cassio King was an intimidating man. All Luciano’s friends were. Their vast resources could easily make Ella and I disappear and nobody would ask questions. *Well, except my fucking uncle or Benito King.* We were cash cows to them. “Because you and your friend already made up your mind,” he concluded.

He was right, of course. We didn’t trust any of them after Luciano’s betrayal. Massimo’s too. They treated us without any regard for our safety and well-being.

Luciano stopped his friend. “Grace, like I told you yesterday. Let me help you.”

Russian Roulette.

“You betrayed me!” Those words from that winter day evening rang in my ears.

Click.

“Then you should have left us in Italy,” I muttered without meeting their eyes. Instead, I focused on my son.

“Thank you for dinner, Mr. Vitale,” Cassio commented to Nonno, changing the focus of the conversation. “Luciano. Mrs. Vitale.”

He purposely called me that, I knew it. It was a reminder there was no escaping this life. Once you were born into it or married into it, you were in it for life. Till death do us part.

But what if I had no choice and was forced into it. *Does it still count?*

Our rushed wedding flashed in my mind.

The bedroom door rattles with the force of Luciano’s fists.

“Grace, you fucking open this door or I will tear it down.” His voice was cold and threatening. I knew it wasn’t an empty threat, but did my mind or body care. Nope, it didn’t. My body caved into his touch every time, and my mind rebelled and fought him at every angle.

Like some damn foreplay.

“No.”

“Grace.” One word. The meaning behind his calm voice more threatening than all the actual threats he could ever utter.

“I don’t want to marry you,” I muttered, frazzled. The ceremony had started, but I refused to leave the room. After the make-up artist and the

dressmaker got me all ready, they gave me a few minutes before the ceremony.

Instead of working on calming my nerves, I locked the door and then barricaded it with the dresser. I was surprised nobody below me could hear the loud, screeching noise of the dresser legs against the hardwood floor. There was so much racket, I was sure someone would barge through the door at any moment.

"Open. The. Fucking. Door."

"No."

"You better step away from that door, Grace." Whatever, dude! Who did he think he was? "I'm shooting the door."

Wait. What?

"Make sure you are away from the door. I don't want to shoot my bride on her wedding day." His tone was mocking but serious. Who in the hell was this asshole?

"Wait." I yelled out. "Wait."

I put all my strength into pushing against the heavy, mahogany dresser. "Fuck, it was lighter on the way to the door," I muttered to myself.

"Hurry the fuck up." His tone was impatient, demanding.

"Buy lighter furniture next time, jerk."

I barely pushed it a foot to the left of the door. I couldn't get it all the way back. Maybe I exhausted all my strength while I pushed it over to the door.

"Grace-" I quickly unlocked the door.

I swung it open and stepped aside. "Jesus, dude. Learn some patience."

Luciano Vitale in a tux was a breathtaking sight. I have seen plenty of men clean up in a tux but this man… he made the tux look good. If GQ *magazine could snap his photo and plaster it on their pages, these tuxedos would sell out in the shortest millisecond of the century. My breath stuck in my lungs and the most stupid thought stuck in my mind.*

Dying while staring at his beautiful face wouldn't be such a terrible thing. What a dumb thought, but still it remained.

"Not dude. Your soon-to-be-husband."

The anger on his face quickly extinguished as his eyes roamed my body. Despite the fact this wedding was thrown together at the last minute, I had to admit the dress was exquisite. And the make-up done to my face was minimal and only accented my unusual eyes and soft lips.

The wedding dress was made out of a swathe of white satin. It fit perfectly against my body, accenting every curve. The Swarovski crystals sewn into the bodice glimmered under the lights, accenting my breast and pale neckline. The long train flared behind me for two feet. I wasn't thin and have never been overly athletic but the way this dress fit made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Your hair looks like flames against the satin of that dress." The tone of his voice surprised me. Instead of mock, disdain, or anger… it almost sounded awed or reverent.

"It's bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony." I didn't know what else to say. The way he looked at me made every single inch of me tremble with anticipation. I was tempted to ask him to tear the dress off me and ravish me right here and now.

"Let's go get married."

We were doomed from the moment we said '*I do'*. Yes, I'd held onto hope and I fell head over heels for him. But he certainly didn't fall for me. Otherwise, he would have trusted me. He would have known that I would have never betrayed him. I couldn't give someone my body, heart, and soul and then go betray them the next minute.

"Remember our talk, Gracy," Nonno's voice stopped the trip down the memory lane. "You are strong."

After dinner was done, Matteo demanded Luciano give him a bath. While it was a nice break, I felt a bit slighted. I sat on the floor watching Luciano give our son a bath. He was making a mess of it, but I had to give it to him. He was dedicated to it. But then I knew that about my husband. When he decided on something, he put all his energy into it.

His sleeves were rolled up, revealing his strong forearms. Black ink snaked from his wrist up his forearms, and I knew it covered his entire arm. He must be working out a lot because his muscles were toned and strong. I imagined his shirt sliding off his back and tracing my fingers over each muscle on his back. His skin would be warm to my touch. It was always warm to my touch, like a burning heater.

"Grace," Luciano's voice pulled me from my lusted mind back to reality.

"Hmmm?" I met his eyes. That gaze used to make me so weak in my knees. I would have done anything for this man. Instead, his ruthlessness and distrust burned it all to ashes. Well, except this damn desire of mine.

But I could blame that to my abstinence. All we had done last night apparently didn't sate my lust for this man.

"So yes?" he asked and I wondered what he was talking about.

"Yes what?"

"You agree to accompany me?"

I frowned. "To what?"

What the hell was he talking about?

"I have an event tomorrow night. Do you agree to accompany me?"

"What event?"

"Just an appearance in the city at the fundraiser."

I laughed. "You, at a fundraiser?" I retorted sarcastically. "What are you raising money for? Guns? Drugs?"

He didn't like it, I saw I hit a sore subject. But that was good. I didn't care about his hurt feelings. I had to remember who he was.

"No, it is a fundraiser for victims of trafficking." Now that surprised me. "Cassio and I run it, but all the men you met are on the board. Including Raphael Santos." My eyes flashed to him. He just confirmed my prior suspicion that my uncle lost his Florida connection. "Raphael took over for his father and has a different approach to human trafficking. His brother-in-law and half-sister will be there."

How nice! A freaking mobster gathering! So they could make themselves feel better.

"No, I won't go with you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to." What kind of stupid question was that? "Besides, I have plans."

"What plans?"

"None of your business," I retorted dryly.

"Because you are scared to be alone with me? We had a good time yesterday."

I sat up straight. "Maybe, but you tried to kill me three years ago," I hissed under my tone. "Don't think I'd ever forget you'd just as easily kill me as you'd take me to bed."

We stared at each other, hate and bitterness mixed with flames of lust flowing through my veins.

"Mama," Matteo's voice pulled my gaze away from the husband I wished I had never run into again. I couldn't say that I wished I never met

him because unbeknownst to him, he gave me Matteo, my biggest treasure.

“Yes, baby?”

“Benne?” *Good?*

“Yes,” I told him. “Okay, let’s get out of the bath. We have just enough time to get dressed, brush teeth, and read a quick bedtime story.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell Luciano to go, to dismiss him. I didn’t need him around, making me wish for things that could never be.

“Okay, Matteo,” Luciano spoke before I had a chance to open my mouth. “I’ll help you out.”

“You don’t have to,” I objected, hoping he’d get a hint and leave. “I got it.”

But it was too late, Matteo was already under Luciano’s spell. “Both read books.”

I gritted my teeth. We did a quick job of drying him off, getting him dressed, brushing his teeth and then tucking him into bed. Just like my parents used to do it with me. It felt like a real family moment.

Matteo patted a spot next to him at each side of his bed, demanding we both lay next to him.

“Okay, which book?” I asked my son, my throat slightly strained from emotions. The truth was I wanted a real family. A husband that loved me, children running around our home, grandparents that cherished them. I wanted it all, though I was more likely to get to the moon than get any of it.

“Fiaba,” he demanded. *Fairy tale.*

“Well, buddy. Luciano can read you a fiaba. I’ll read you Green Eggs and Ham.”

I handed Luciano one of the fairy tales in Italian. “You first.”

He started reading without objections, but something in his eyes unsettled me. The burning in his gaze, the intensity. It made my insides melt, made my body react, and it was infuriating.

He read in his deep voice, Italian words rolling off his tongue effortlessly. There was something so damn gut-wrenching in this moment. The clear picture of what could have been and would never be. It made me furious at the destiny that wouldn’t let me have it. It made me furious with this man that took it all away. It made me furious that despite it all, my body still reacted to him.

And most of all, I hated myself for still wanting my own fairy tale.

“Grace,” Luciano’s voice was a soft whisper. I was so deep in my thoughts, his voice startled me. “He’s asleep.”

My gaze traveled to our son in between us and then shifted to my husband. I watched those hazel eyes. God, help me. I wanted him. Even after everything, I wanted him. I couldn’t let him destroy me. I barely pulled through last time. A child growing inside me was my saving grace. What would be if I let him pull me into his charms again?

I broke our eye contact and gently lifted off the bed. Luciano followed suit.

The moment I closed the door of Matteo’s room behind me, Luciano spoke, “The event tomorrow-”

“No,” I cut him off. “I am not going with you.”

Heartbeat of silence.

“Your uncle will be there.”

I whirled around. Chest to chest. Toe to toe.

“Why didn’t you say that earlier?” I watched my husband for any traces of deceit. I couldn’t gauge whether he spoke the truth or not. How in the hell did my uncle end up invited to an event that would fund the survivors of the very atrocities he and Benito King supported! Was it all a fake front? “And why would you have my uncle be part of your event? I thought you hated his guts.”

“I do.” I eyed him suspiciously, waiting for his elaboration. It never came. “The Romano family will pay for their sins, Grace.”

Luciano didn’t have scruples when going after what he wanted. Or destroying people in his path. I should know firsthand.

A pang in my chest. I ignored it.

“What is the dress code?” I haven’t decided whether I’d go. Though an idea formed in my mind. It might be easier to handle my family if I handled my grandmother alone and then took care of my uncle. Once and for all!

“I’ll send something to our room tomorrow,” he replied. His expression was unreadable, but I felt like he was a cat that just ate the mouse. And I was the mouse.

Let him believe that. I wouldn’t be anyone’s pawn anymore. Not for my husband. Not for my uncle. Not for my grandmother. This time, I would look out for my son, Ella, and myself. Because nobody else would.

I nodded and went to walk away from him when his hand wrapped around my wrist.

“Where are you going?”

“To bed, Luciano.”

He chuckled. That bastard actually chuckled. “I’m happy to hear that.”

His head lowered, and his mouth brushed lightly across the skin on the crook of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. Even as I tried to lie to myself, saying I didn’t want to do this, my head tilted to accommodate him better. Obviously, I was a bad liar.

“Sleep in our room again,” he murmured, his hot breath burning my skin. I shouldn’t cave in. I was quickly falling for him again, just as easily as last time. “Don’t fight me on this anymore. Please.”

My eyes flared to his face.

Coming from a man that never begged. Never asked. Only demanded. So I caved again.

Damn this man!

For making me weak, stupid, and all kinds of wrong things. I should fight him, resist him, but the only feeling that lingered was the need for him.

My hands raised up, fingers pushed through his hair, and I gripped his soft stands. I wasn’t sure whether I was trying to punish him or hold on to sanity. Both of our sanities, because this lust and desire shouldn’t burn between us like infernos of hell.

He must have sensed my internal battle because he sealed his mouth over mine. More like, crashed against my lips, kissing me with reckless desperation. The same one I felt burning in the pit of my stomach.

He didn’t wait for the welcome, his tongue pushed against my lips and conquered. I molded into his body, desperate for his touch, clawing at his scalp. God, this man would be my demise.

No, not would be. He is my demise.

“I will never have enough of you, wife.” His voice was low, husky, desire laced in every word.

The way he watched me, the primal need in his hazel eyes consumed every single, shivering breath and fiber within me. His hands snaked down to my butt and grabbed my ass, lifting me up. Without breaking the kiss, my legs hooked around his waist, grinding against him.

This need coursing through my body would burn me to ashes. Maybe it would be a welcomed relief.

His mouth was searing my skin, everywhere his lips touched, he marked me. My mouth and hands were hungry for every inch of him. With each swipe of his tongue, he ignited my desire to a whole new level.

From the corner of my mind, I registered he was in our bedroom. Yes, our bedroom. Because there hasn't been anyone else for me before him nor after him.

The door shut behind us with a loud slam and he lowered me onto the floor.

"Undress," he commanded, his voice hoarse.

The passion in his eyes had me instantly obeying him. Because I wanted to shed my clothes off, feel his skin against mine. Our eyes locked. Looking at him was like looking at my own dark prince.

Passionate. Unforgiving. Ruthless.

I lifted my emerald shirt off. A long time ago, Luciano told me he loved me in anything colored green. He loved the contrast of my hair color against the green. Passion and ivy, he said. Did I subconsciously pick it for my husband?

My white, snug jeans followed. The entire time, he watched me with hunger in his eyes. His gaze trailed over my body, each lingering look caressing my exposed skin. My bra and panties were next and his ominous gaze turned dark with want and need while he soaked in the view of my naked body.

"Your turn," I rasped, my breathing erratic. It didn't escape me how easily I succumbed to this man. What the fuck ever, I was a weak woman.

He stripped out of his own clothes, fast and efficiently. My mouth watered at seeing him naked. Every. Damn. Time. I loved his body, cut from marble, ripped and chiseled to perfection.

My husband was a devastatingly beautiful man.

"On the bed." His order had me quivering with anticipation.

Without hesitation, I climbed onto his California King bed. He hadn't even touched me yet, and I felt the trickle of desire running down my inner thigh. Watching him through hooded lids, he moved onto the bed, like a predator stalking his prey.

*I **am** his prey.* Willing prey, it would seem. He had stalked me for the last three years.

He hovered over me, his knees parting my legs wider. As his eyes zeroed on my pussy, there was no hiding my body's reaction to him. The

desire glistening between my thighs was all the evidence he needed. I was eager to have him inside me.

“So fucking beautiful,” he croaked, his hand on his cock, stroking himself. There was no glee or mocking in his voice. Only reverence. Every fiber of me melted for him. I arched my back, telling him without words I needed him inside me. “I’m going to fuck you until the entire house, entire city, hears you scream my name.”

His words affected me, making me a slave for his touch and his claim. He rubbed himself against my entrance, toying with me, teasing me. My nipples were so tight that they ached, needing him to bite down on the sensitive skin to release this tension.

“Please, Luciano.” He was driving me insane with this burning need licking every inch of my skin. I thrust my hips up with desperation, uncaring that I seemed greedy and desperate for him. He didn’t seem to notice or care though, because the next instant with one hard thrust, he pushed all the way in, filling me to the hilt.

I sucked in a breath as sensations rippled through me. This was my utter submission, I was his. I had always been his. Luciano’s face morphed into one of utter possession.

“You are mine, wife,” he gritted as he pulled out and thrust back in. “Every breath you take,” he growled as he pushed back in, “…is mine. And I’m yours.”

His grip on my hips tightened, his fingers digging into my flesh. It was a delicious kind of pain. I leaned up and took his lips into a kiss. His strokes, initially measured and leisurely, started increasing in speed.

And then he started moving relentlessly, like a possessed man. My nails scraped down his back, encouraging him, begging him to fuck me harder. Deeper. Merciless and ruthless.

I dug my nails into his back, my eyelids closed, focused only on the pleasure he was giving me.

“More,” I pleaded. “Harder.”

His movements became harder, ruthless… he was rutting me with quick, deep thrusts, and stars swirled behind my eyelids.

“Open your eyes,” he grunted his demand.

I barely peeled my eyelids, meeting his lust crazed gaze. I felt like I was coming unglued, blinded by the pleasure he was offering me.

“I want you to see who’s fucking you.” He drove deeply into me.

“Yes, yes, yes. More,” I begged through broken moans, my head whipping from side to side.

“Mine to fuck.” Thrust. “Mine to break.” Thrust. “Mine to save.”

My body was climbing higher and higher, with each erratic, hard pound of his. Incoherent words left my lips, my mind completely lost to the extreme pleasure my husband was offering.

“You. Are. Fucking. Mine.”

The pleasure burst through my veins, and I felt myself spiraling off the edge, into a million pieces. The orgasm shook my inner core, my pussy clenching around his cock, milking him for everything. He continued to move, thrusting through my orgasm, thrusting… once, twice, till his body tensed as he groaned his own release.

We remained like that, both of us panting heavily as we slowly came down off our heights. His head rested against the crook of my neck. Unspoken words hung in the air, heavy with meaning. I have never gotten over Luciano Vitale… my husband. My demise.

My heart pounded against my chest, and I feared he’d somehow hear the whispers of my heart, confessing to my husband I never got over him. That I still loved him.

I was doomed! If his gun against my skull didn’t squash these feelings of love, I wasn’t sure what would.

IT WAS JUST PAST MIDNIGHT AND MY BARE FEET MADE NO SOUND AGAINST the marble floor. I wore nothing but my panties and Luciano’s dress shirt that came down to my knees. There was something comforting about the familiar citrus woodsy smell of it, brushing against my skin.

I headed downstairs, to the pool area where I told Ella to meet me. The moment I stepped outside, the cool September air hit my flushed face. For a moment, I halted my step, closed my eyes, and listened to the stillness of the night while the air cooled my hot skin. If only I could freeze time and leave us in this cocoon. It might not be a realistic cocoon, but it was better than the reality.

I opened my eyes and noted Ella already seated by the pool, waiting for me, her small frame sitting on the edge of the pool with her feet dangling

off of it.

“Hey,” I greeted her and sat down next to her, mirroring her position.

Throwing me a side glance, she gave me a small smile. “You look like you tumbled through bedsheets with a certain husband of yours.” Her shoulder nudged me lightly, her tone teasing.

I rolled my eyes. “Didn’t you tell me to take advantage of the fact that I was under the same roof as him?”

A soft chuckle escaped her. “I sure did, although I didn’t think you’d take my advice.”

It wasn’t my intention to take her advice, but it seemed I was a weak woman when it came to my husband.

We sat in silence, both of our eyes lingering on the surface of the pool. The darkness of the night that surrounded us reflected our fears.

“What did you find?” I finally asked.

“Your uncle and Benito King have now put a price on our heads, so other mobsters within their approved circles would help locate us.”

Boom-bum. Boom-bum. Boom-bum.

I knew it was coming; from the moment we set foot on the U.S. soil, it was only a matter of time. Seconds. Minutes. Days. Not months; I always knew we didn’t have months.

But damn it, hope was a bitch, a heartless bitch. And even now, it glowed in the dark… like a fucking lightning bug. Always a hopeful lightning bug. It would be squashed - either by the ruthless mobsters or by cruel reality.

“We’ll have to run. Without Matteo,” I whispered, and those words physically hurt my chest. Both of us threw a glance up at the marble façade of Luciano’s mansion. “Tomorrow, after my grandmother’s event. We kill her, then kill my uncle and we run.”

One heartbeat of deadly, earth shattering silence that tore at both of our souls.

“God, Grace. Do you think we could bring Mat-” she cut herself off.

“No, we can’t,” I muttered. It killed me to say that, but this was the safest place for Matteo. If we pulled through, and if it ever became safe for us, I’d come back for him. Even knowing I was doing the right thing by my son, it shattered me to walk away. I had to do it, but every ounce of my being as his mother objected to it.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t but that didn’t matter. Surviving this; protecting Matteo was what mattered the most. “They won’t give up till they have us.”

I’d failed. I should have hunted down my uncle, grandmother, and Benito King and killed them all. Instead of our petty attempts at diminishing Romano wealth, we should have spent the last three years planning how to hunt them down and kill them. But we pretended they forgot about us, thinking we could live the rest of our lives in hiding. It was an illusion of safety we fooled ourselves into.

Now they were after us even more relentlessly.

“Our fan list keeps growing,” Ella muttered. She was scared, as she should be. I was terrified.

I swallowed hard. I knew what I had to do, but my heart twisted in agony with the thought of it. Tomorrow, I’d leave Matteo behind. *Shit, that hurts!*

It was the right thing to do, but it hurt so badly. I didn’t know how I’d survive it. He was my entire life.

Ella and I locked eyes and my heart bled. “Are you sure you want to come along, Ella?”

“Yes. My debt remains unpaid to your uncle and the King family. If I stay, Matteo is at risk.”

“Okay.” My voice was hoarse. I knew her heart was breaking too. She fell for Massimo. I fell for my husband again. This life was a damn cluster… what happened to a simple life with a white picket fence?

Oh yeah! It was interrupted by some ancient agreement by my ancestors to provide a belle for fucking mobsters. Monsters, more like it.

God, I didn’t know if I could survive life without my son in it. Matteo was forever part of my DNA. And we would leave it all behind. The only semblance of family we had.

“At the gala, we kill my grandmother,” I whispered low, ignoring the dull ache in my heart that would soon be the only thing left to feel. “Then we go to Luciano’s fundraiser and corner my uncle. Once they are dead, Matteo is safe from my family. And the two of us will run.” I took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled. “Luciano wants me to go with him to his fundraiser. I’ll tell him we’ll meet him there. It will be our only chance to get close to him.”

She swallowed hard, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “I know it’s the best we can do but I wish we could kill Benito and Marco King too.”

I wished it too. “It would be a suicide,” I whispered. “We are way out of our element.”

And that was an understatement. Yes, we learned how to hack. Yes, we laundered dirty money. We learned to shoot a gun, but we were at least smart enough to realize when we were outmuscled.

“What are my favorite ladies doing up in the middle of the night?” Nonno’s voice startled us and both of us jumped out of fright. My hand on my chest tried to calm my racing heart.

Giving Ella a side glance, I nodded. We’d be ready to run tomorrow night, after we killed my grandmother and uncle. She lifted herself onto her feet, and I followed her suit. Nonno was too old to try and sit down at the edge of the pool.

“Goodnight, Nonno,” she muttered and leaned over to place a kiss onto his wrinkled cheek. It was her goodbye. She left both of us behind as she went into the house.

“We both have jet lag,” I answered his earlier question. “We couldn’t sleep.” My lies were bitter. “Matteo had a good time at the beach.”

It was my attempt to change the course of our discussion.

“He is a good boy,” he murmured, smiling. Talking about him always made him smile.

At least Nonno loved him. Even not knowing Matteo was Vitale, both Luciano and Nonno were good to him. Once they got their confirmation, I knew without a doubt Matteo would be loved and protected. Nonno loved him already.

“Nonno, can you promise me something?”

“What’s that, daughter?”

My throat was squeezing, making it hard to speak. “If something happens to me, keep Matteo safe.” His sharp inhale lingered in the air. “You and Luciano keep him safe… please.”

“What is it, Grace?” His hand took mine, and I looked at the old man. It was ironic that my life was connected to his even before my parents died and I never knew it. Until that night when Luciano dragged me out of his nightclub and right down the aisle, I never even knew of this man that was supposed to be my guardian.

My life would have been so different if he had been.

“Promise me, please,” I begged in a whisper.

“I promise.”

“Thank you.” I leaned over and kissed his other cheek. This man has always been good to me. No matter what happened, he would keep his word. I strode towards the house, leaving him behind. I headed back into my husband’s bed. It would be our last night together.

Before going to Luciano’s bedroom, I stopped by Matteo’s room. He was fast asleep, his feet dangling off the bed. Leaning over him, I placed a kiss onto his forehead. He had my heart from the first time I felt him move inside me, and once he was born, I was completely in love.

Luciano’s and my son. A product of a bitter revenge but the best outcome, regardless of the heartache that would follow when I walked away, leaving my heart behind.

Different scenarios played in my mind, trying to find any safe alternative that would make it safe to bring him along. I couldn’t see any. Luciano would keep him safe. My husband was a lot of things but one thing he excelled at was protecting his family. And Matteo was his family, his flesh and blood.

I felt that familiar tingling down my spine, and I knew Luciano was right behind me. My eyes lingered on my son’s face, trying to memorize each line. He was a part of me, and the thought of living on without him was tearing my soul to shreds. I was literally falling apart on the inside, and I marveled that on the outside I seemed put together.

I stood up, Luciano’s chest right behind me. I leaned back into my husband’s hard chest, and his arms wrapped around me. I allowed myself this weakness, for the last time. These memories might be the only thing that would make the lonely future bearable.

Maybe another life, another time we could have had a chance.

“He’s a sound sleeper.” Luciano’s hot breath burned my skin, sending shivers and regret through my body. “Like his mother.”

That was pretty much one of the very few things he got from me. In every other way, he was like his father. I relished in Luciano’s body heat, knowing that the rest of my life, however long it would be, would be spent cold and alone. Ella had fallen for Massimo. She would have her own wounds to lick.

I took my husband’s hand and pulled him out of Matteo’s room. I kept walking towards my husband’s bedroom, Luciano’s footsteps right behind me. Neither one of us said a word. Tonight would be for us… for me.

The bedroom door shut behind us with a soft click. I turned to face this man. He was so much taller than me, I lifted my face to study his features. Matteo would grow up to look like him. I had no doubt about that. *And I'm going to miss it all;* the thought sent sobs up my throat, but I choked them down.

I fought my attraction and my love for this man for so long. Even after he pulled that trigger against my temple, I still loved him. And I hated myself because I loved him. But now, it was different. He was different. I was definitely different.

Unlike the earlier passion, now I wanted to savor the moment. These last few hours before dawn. Tomorrow, I'd leave them all behind.

I lifted on my toes and reached for his lips. Those sinful lips that could send my body into flames. Those lips that could send my heart to fluttering heights and shatter it into pieces. I grazed my teeth across his lower lip, brushing my tongue right behind.

His tongue pushed into my mouth, conquering like he always had. He didn't need to conquer what was already his, but I couldn't tell him those words. Instead, I would show him. I pressed my soft body against his hard one. My hands wrapped around the nape of his head, my fingers tangling into his thick dark hair.

"Wife," he murmured against my lips, both of our breathing labored. "What are you doing to me?"

He had on jeans and an unbuttoned white shirt. He must have pulled them on when he went searching for me. Or maybe he had some business to take care of. It didn't matter.

Pushing his shirt off of his shoulders, I let it fall soundlessly onto the floor and his magnificent chest on full display. I pressed a kiss to his lips and closed my eyes, savoring the taste of him, committing it to memory. His heart jackhammered under my touch, matching my own pulse.

Nobody before him ever compared. And there would be nobody after him - ever. I trailed my lips over his tanned olive skin, down his neck. My hands reached for his belt, my fingers fumbling with it and his jean buttons, eager to get rid of his clothes. Soon his pants followed the pile of clothes discarded on the floor. I continued the trail down his chiseled abs.

He might have been forty, much older than me, but nobody could deny Luciano had a body of a god. I nudged him backwards. With each step he took, I took a step forward till we were against the bed.

“Sit down,” I told him, my voice barely above a whisper.

I lowered myself down on my knees, hitting the plush of the carpet. Nudging in between his spread knees, I vowed to myself tonight I’d bring him to his knees. *My parting gift*, I thought slightly bitter.

My husband’s grip moved to my neck, gently squeezing, reflecting his dominance and possession over me. I didn’t care. Truth of the matter was I belonged to him. I’d admit it to myself.

I licked my lips, my heart thundered hard against my chest, threatening to explode. Tonight would be our last night. I kept my eyes on his as I leaned in, taking the head of his cock between my lips, his taste on my tongue a familiarity I missed.

“Fuck,” he groaned. His hand fisted into my hair as I circled the head of his cock with my tongue. His legs spread wider to make more room for me and I broke our eye contact to lick him from base to tip, resulting in another tortured groan from him.

Luciano might own me but I owned him too. I circled the head of his cock again and again, flicking my tongue at the clear pre-cum that beaded on the tip, humming my approval. He tasted delicious.

My eyes raised to meet his hazel, possessive gaze again. I ran my tongue around the head before sucking all of him into my mouth, taking him deep down my throat.

His head fell back. “That’s it, my love.” Heat bloomed between my legs at his praise, the wetness slicking my thighs at seeing him at my mercy.

My breasts rubbed against his thighs, the thin shirt material in the way although sparks of pleasure fluttered through me. I sucked him hard, gliding in and out. The way he tasted was my aphrodisiac. The ache between my legs pulsed with the need for him, but I ignored it.

His hand grabbed onto a fistful of my hair and moved my head, controlling the rhythm. Up and down, deep into my mouth. Our eyes never wavered from each other, he watched me with a half-lidded gaze. He pushed himself deep into my throat, and I moaned with his cock inside my mouth.

With a groan, he pulled me away from him.

“Naked. Now.” His demand was a grunt, his voice hoarse. I stood up and slipped his shirt off and my panties followed. I stood naked in front of him. “Get on the bed,” he hissed, while his gaze burned hot on me.

A soft chuckle left me, despite my heart that hurt in my chest. “This seems like déjà vu.”

Even before I finished my statement, I followed his order, climbing over the bed, my butt at full display when his palm connected with my butt cheek. *Smack!*

“Hey,” I protested, but there was no heat to it. I glanced at him over my shoulder and wiggled my butt at him. *Smack.*

Damn it, I fucking liked it.

His palms ran up my legs, the roughness of his hands felt good against my soft skin. The anticipation made my stomach tighten, my body greedy for more of him. His thumbs lingered close to my ass, pressing into my inner thigh and I slightly parted them, pushing into his touch. I was wet for him, the trickle of my arousal trailing down. I felt his thumb smear it against my skin, igniting a spark in the pit of my stomach.

In a sudden movement, he flipped me onto my back, my head hitting the pillows, my hair spreading across it. The heat in his gaze was raw, unadulterated. My pulse raced in anticipation. He crawled over me, then yanked me closer by the back of my neck until my chest was against his.

“You are mine, Grace,” he growled into my ear. “You’ve been mine from the moment you took your first breath. And you’ll be mine when you take your last breath.”

And then he nipped my neck, marking me. My initial whimper turned into a moan as his mouth tracked down my body, licking, kissing, nibbling, and setting off fireworks all throughout my body.

He sucked a nipple into his mouth and my back arched off the bed. Sparks ignited through my veins, the flames igniting and spreading like wildfire.

“Luciano,” I breathed, his name a raspy whisper on my lips.

Then he lowered himself down my body, positioning himself between my spread thighs and buried his face between my legs, then shoved his tongue deep inside me. My back arched off the sheets and I cried out, while my fingers fisted the sheets. My body shuddered under the heat of his tongue and a rush of pleasure flooded me.

He made a low hum, like he was enjoying the best cognac or dessert. It vibrated through every single inch of me. Both his hands pushed under my ass and he lifted my hips, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my ass as

he fucked me with his tongue. It was as if he needed me on his tongue, something reverent in the way he was devouring me.

“Oh. My. God.” I moaned, digging my hands into his thick, dark hair, his name slipping from my lips as his tongue swirled over my clit before sucking. “Luciano,” I breathed. “More. Oh, God. Please.”

His deep noises as he devoured me drove me crazy with lust. I peeled my eyes open and met his smoldering gaze, burning me with his own heat. He watched me as he lapped me steadily, fingering me faster and harder, until I was wanton putty under his touch.

In and out. In and out. Loud moans echoed through the silence of the night, as I rocked my hips against his face shamelessly. His one hand reached up and pinched my swollen clit, then immediately brushed his tongue over it.

“Fuck.” Pleasure rippled through me, my core shaking as my husband continued lapping at me hungrily, making soft noises of approval.

He continued sucking on my clit, then pushed his finger inside me as his other hand reached up my body and pinched one of my nipples. It was too much; it wasn’t enough. His stubble scratched my inner thighs, his teeth grazing over my clit and a scream clawed its way out of my throat as an orgasm rippled through me.

I writhed against his mouth as raw pleasure shook my body and small sobs of relief rang in our bedroom. The pulsing, throbbing need for him was still here. He rose to his knees, his chin wet from my juices.

His mouth took mine in a hard, possessive kiss, our tongues tangling, as I tasted myself on his lips.

“I need you inside me,” I pleaded against his lips, opening my legs wider.

His eyes flared with heat. His body covered mine, making my skin burn for him. He kissed my neck as he braced his hands on either side of my head. My hands slid down his back, his muscles hard under my fingertips. There were so many words on the tip of my tongue. I wanted to tell him I loved him; I craved him.

“I need you,” I begged, my body pushing up, as he positioned himself at my entrance. He stroked his cock up and down my slit, nudging forward. My fingers trailed down to his abs then snaked around his back, as my lips sought out his mouth.

In one forceful thrust, he filled me to the hilt, burying himself deep inside me. His mouth swallowed my scream, and then he started to fuck me hard, driving deep, his hips working like pistons. His grunts of pleasure matched mine, my body opened to him, letting him lay claim. I loved feeling him inside me, like fitting a last piece of the puzzle.

His weight on me comforting, he fucked hard, dominating me, breaking me with each thrust. I surrendered my body, heart, and soul to him. I buried my face in his neck, inhaling his unique, masculine scent, committing it to memory for all the lonely nights that would come.

I was so close, his shuddering grunts told me he was close too.

“I love you, Grace,” he groaned hoarsely, and it sent me tumbling over the edge, my body convulsing around him and at the same time my heart leapt into the clouds recognizing his words. The pleasure consumed every fiber of me as I bucked underneath him, as I sucked hard on the pulse pounding in the side of his neck.

He didn’t falter, but kept thrusting hard through my clenching pussy as the orgasm shook me to my core. My head was spinning, my heart was breaking, and my body was crashing.

“My wife. My life,” he rasped and he shuddered, his final thrust deep before he stilled and spilled inside me. His breathing ragged, his chest rose and fell with each breath, and I listened to his breathing as everything around us stilled.

My hands wrapped around him, holding on to him for the last time. Tears prickling behind my closed eyelids, and I didn’t dare to move, or risk breaking down into a full blown sobbing.

Three years ago, I told my husband I loved him. He sent me away.

Today he gave me those same words. And I would run away.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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LUCIANO

"How is it going with your wife?" Cassio questioned me. After getting his shipment back yesterday and our dinner, we all went our own ways. We had legitimate businesses to run, and not so legitimate ones. More importantly, I wanted to work on my marriage to Grace as well as getting a security detail to keep her protected from Marco King and her family.

My eyes have been locked on the view outside my window where Grace played with Matteo and Ella in the pool. She didn't know I was back home. Her carefree laugh carried through the open window, and I watched her hold Matteo by his waist, teaching him to swim.

My father, Matteo and Grace spent yesterday afternoon at the beach. When they got back, they both decided it was time for Matteo to learn how to swim. Hence today, Grace, Ella, and my father dedicated all their day to swimming lessons.

"You are doing it," her happy voice carried through the breeze, amidst the water splashing. "Good job, baby."

"Sì, Matteo. Good job." My father commended him as he watched the entire scene with a smile on his lips. Since Grace came back, he had been rejuvenated. He spent every waking moment with them. I wanted to spend every waking moment with them too, but there was so much shit happening right now.

Grace wore a white two piece bathing suit, in the old-fashioned style. It wasn't revealing, but it made her look hot as fuck. I thought back to two nights ago and our ride back home. There was no resentment in her eyes

after our desperate rumble in the car. But unlike in the past, she retreated. Once we came back from our high, she cleaned herself up and sat back into her seat. I could sense the invisible walls she immediately raised around herself. Same happened when I brought her home and then again last night after we put Matteo to bed.

But I could be patient. *I will be patient*. She would be worth every minute of waiting. When we finally got back home that night I beat down Ian at the club, I took my wife to my bed. Correction, our bed. She slept in our bed, in my arms. Reluctantly, but she did. The next morning, she was gone even before I woke up. Same happened after our last night's tangle between the sheets. This morning I woke up to an empty bed.

"Luciano?" Cassio's voice reminded me of his question.

We both had drinks in our hands. It was late afternoon and my wife succeeded in avoiding me most of today and yesterday. We had a lot to talk about, figure out but the only time we found each other was at night.

It didn't help that I had to deal with shit, so I was in and out of the house. Nico flew back to Baltimore last night. He had something urgent going on and a shipment to take care of. Alessio went back to Canada to handle his father's funeral and he would have his hands full for a while, I was sure. Alessio's father was a bastard and there'd be no love lost between my friend and him, especially knowing what the sick old man did. Yes, his father ruled the Montreal mafia but only in name. Until now. Alessandro Russo was the mafia head of the Canadian East coast as far as anyone was concerned.

So it left Cassio, Luca, and me to deal with everything. With Raphael's help.

The Romano family was hosting their annual gala. Neither Cassio nor I RSVP-ed, but we intended to make an unexpected appearance. Right after our fundraiser. Grace never confirmed that she'd accompany me to my fundraiser event, but it was a custom for the wife to accompany the husband to the fundraiser. My mother never missed a single one while she was alive, always on my father's arm. Now that my wife was back, I wanted her on my arm. Although she kept resisting her wifely duties. Well, except in the bedroom.

Last night when I went searching for her and found her in Matteo's room, I had the oddest feeling she was saying goodbye. Even when we went back to our bedroom. Every touch felt like a goodbye. It had to be my

paranoia because Grace would give her life for her son. She'd never leave him behind.

One thing was for sure though. Something shifted between me and my wife last night. Albeit, I wasn't sure if it shifted in the right direction.

"It's going great," I muttered in response to Cassio's question and gulped the drink down.

"That good, huh?" I couldn't fool anyone.

Even a blind man could see Grace hated my guts, resented me. Yes, her body melted under me, but that was as far as it went. Her body responded to me but her walls were strongholds keeping me away.

She avoided me at every turn. She cleared the room before I even had a chance to open my mouth. We lived in the same house, but you'd think we lived in different states as little as we talked.

"Have you tried talking to her?" Cassio asked the obvious.

I shot him a glare. "And say what? Let's start over."

He observed me pensively. "Well, you could start with that."

"Right. And knowing all you do, would you start over?"

"Well, first of all. I know the entire story and know that gun was empty. She doesn't. If I didn't know it, I'd tell you to give it up, and you have no chance with her. As it stands, I think you have a real chance."

I poured myself another glass. I've done some fucked up shit over the last three years. Those first few months after she left me, I was on a rampage. I tried to take many women to bed, desperate to get Grace out of my system. I was so fucked I couldn't ever take it all the way. It was all wrong, with every single one of them. I couldn't even get hard for them - they smelled wrong, felt wrong, looked wrong. They were all wrong! After three months, I realized I was doomed. There wouldn't be a woman ever to capture me the way my wife did. But she was out of my reach. Disappeared without a trace.

Obviously, Grace had men too. She had no issues taking it all the way. After all, she got knocked up. Jealousy burned through my veins that she'd care about another man so much to have his child. When we got married, she insisted on not having children. It would seem she just didn't want them with me.

Who was the father? I already had Massimo digging for a name. The girls' passports and Matteo's were all fake, high quality fake passports.

Could we somehow overcome the fact that I put a gun to my wife's head, although it was empty? Would she ever forgive me that I left her at her uncle's doorstep like a stray dog, that I tried to fuck a number of faceless, nameless women trying to get over her? Could I get over the fact she had another man's baby?

These were some large obstacles. Not to mention the trust issues we both had.

"Did you get the name of the kid's father yet?" Cassio's question pulled me out of my thousand questions.

"What makes you think I'm looking for the name?"

He laughed. "I know you, Luciano. You are digging for that shit like your life depends on it."

I took a deep breath. There was no sense in denying it.

"So far nothing. Those two did a good job covering their trails and paperwork." In fact, I'd like to know how in the world they knew how to get fake passports and documentation. "Whoever they used for it, did a good job hiding their shit."

Cassio studied me, like there was something on his mind. "If you want to say something, just spit the shit out. I'm not in the mood for guessing games, Cassio. I have enough of that going on with my wife."

Both Cassio and I were already dressed in our tuxedos for tonight's fundraiser. Of course, we both carried concealed weapons under our jackets. We would not be caught unaware. You never knew when the shadows of our enemies were ready to strike. Just look at my mother and sister. My father thought he was safe, and the one time he didn't have a weapon on him, our enemies struck.

"He's a good looking kid." I didn't expect him to say that at all. "Kind of looks like you."

A bitter laugh escaped me. "Now you are just being a fucking asshole."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I've always been an asshole. Probably why we get along so great." He was right too. "I'm just saying, the boy looks like you. He seems to be the right age too."

I stared at him dumbfounded. There was no freaking way that little boy was mine. Yes, he was a good looking kid. I liked him, but she would have told me if she was pregnant. She would have said something when I threatened to shoot her.

Fuck, that sounded so bad. It was an empty gun, yes, but it didn't make it better.

"She would have said something," I justified, my voice hollow. Would she have told me? The memory of that day has haunted me every day and night since. Her tear-stained face, her trembling bottom lip, fear on her face that I put there.

She told me she loved me, but I was so enraged with her betrayal I didn't even process her words. I didn't listen. The words didn't hit home till much later, when I sat alone back home, in the dark of our bedroom. It was the only time she had mentioned words of love to me. She begged me to listen to her.

Last night, I gave her those same words. She didn't reciprocate them. Although I felt something shift between us; I wasn't entirely sure if it was for the better or worse.

"If you think so," Cassio retorted back. But it was written all over his face. He didn't think she would have told me.

When was the boy turning three? October. Yes, she said it was mid-October. I glanced up to gaze over to the pool area. Matteo and Grace were out of the pool now. He jumped excitedly, Grace and my father sharing a big smile while Ella recorded it all. Like a real happy family moment. Without me.

"Matteo, my boy," I heard my father's voice. "You are going to grow up to be strong like your Papà."

With the startling realization, it became apparent my father saw something I was blind to all along. Now it made sense why my father was so taken with Matteo. Even his name was a clue. She named him after my father.

"I can't jump to conclusions," I murmured, speaking more to myself than my best friend. "I'll have to get the original birth certificate."

"Have Massimo get in touch with my guy," Cassio commented. "I swear, Luciano. You are the smartest, most brilliant man I know. But when it comes to your woman, you are blind as fuck."

Funny, my father said the same thing.

How much did I really know about my wife? She studied music in college, played piano, and spent her high school years away in boarding school. She met Ella there, her first year of high school. They have been close ever since. And the last few years on the run made them even closer.

But my wife never really told me much about herself. She knew about her parents will, but never mentioned it to me. I could have gotten it when we got married. She must have known her uncle was a danger to her, but she never led me to believe she was afraid of her family.

Now, I learned she was the Ghost. Of course, she wouldn't share that with me either. Did she know she corresponded with me? Probably not.

"Let's get back to the business and our plan for tonight." I had to focus on eliminating threats that lurked in the shadows of my wife's life.

"Agreed. By the way, did you ask your father about his connection to Kennedy Romano?"

"I did." That was another thing that irked me. The fact my father kept that large piece of detail a secret. My father never kept secrets between us and this one was pretty big.

"Kennedy Romano and my father crossed paths when Kennedy went after his brother and Benito. They both wanted to reveal to the world that his brother and grandmother had their hands into human trafficking. He said they became good friends and worked together against them. Right before he died, Kennedy Romano asked him if he would take care of his daughter in the event anything happened to him and his wife. Papa agreed. Two days later they were both dead. He said he fought Alphonso for guardianship of Grace, but failed. Since then, he kept an eye on her whenever he could."

"Did they die before or after your mother and sister?"

"Her folks died a few months before."

"Is there a connection?"

"If there is one, my father didn't bring it up." Although, I had to admit it, there seemed to be a lot of connections between Grace's family and mine. Even without taking our marriage into account. "The timing of Alphonso coming after my father, killing my mother and sister is dangerously close to the timing of her parents' death."

"I think you are right," Cassio agreed. "Grace's value to Alphonso was big enough for him to kill and go after the Vitale family if your father tried to get Grace under his protection. Just think, she was the promised belle, worth millions from her mother's side and combine that with her pedigree and beauty…"

He didn't have to finish. My wife suffered under her family's brutality just as mine did. Yes, Grace and I had to talk. Lay it all out on the table and fight them together. I couldn't fault her for her distrust, I earned it. But I'd

prove it to her, over and over again for the rest of our lives, that she could count on me.

The next hour was spent strategizing the best way to hit Alphonso Romano and Benito King. We would see Alphonso tonight, but the venue was too public and without risking Benito King's retaliation, we wouldn't be able to hit without a cause.

"Alphonso will know today that Raphael's deal with him was a trap," I told Cassio. "He might attack first, so we have to be prepared. It will be a perfect excuse to kill him."

"I'm counting on it," Cassio muttered. He was just as eager as I was to start on eliminating threats.

"Have you warned Alexei and Vasili?" The Nikolaev men were more than capable of protecting themselves and their family but advance warning never hurt anyone. "I'd hate to see Alphonso or Benito try to get the women. Vasili will burn down the world if anyone ever touches his pregnant wife."

Not that I blamed him.

"Yes, I sent them the status. They'll be there at the fundraiser. Vasili's wife insisted. She has the scary fucker wrapped around her little finger."

We both grinned. Vasili and his brothers were a special kind of breed. It was almost comical seeing them cave to a woman's request. Probably as comical as seeing me lose my shit over my own wife.

Movement outside had me glancing to the French doors. Grace and Ella stood outside, all dolled up. There was no mistaking they were going out. My wife wore a black strapless gown, accenting her soft curves and it made my cock jump. Each step she took, slits of her dress revealed her long legs. Her heels peeked underneath her long dress and I noticed they were nude color. She never liked matching her shoes to dress color. I still remembered her reasoning.

It makes it stand out when my shoes are a different color from the dress.

Her ginger hair, stark against the dress, was pulled up in a slick, high ponytail, exposing her graceful neck and slim shoulders. She was ready for the fundraiser event although it was too early and she wasn't wearing the dress I sent for her.

Admittedly, this looked beautiful on her so there would be no complaints from me. There would be men I'd have to fight to ensure nobody touched her. Pride swelled inside my chest; it made me want to

shout to the world that she was my woman, have it blasted across every billboard sign in the city and surrounding states.

I was surprised she didn't resist going. I almost expected and readied for bickering. Like our own little foreplay.

Without thinking twice, I strode to the French door and opened them wide.

"Tesoro, you look stunning," I complimented her. She whipped around, her violet blue eyes capturing me in their depths, making me feel like I was drowning. There were so many layers and depths to my woman. Her cheeks blushed pink and it reminded me of how she looked in the heat of passion. Flushed and perfect. I had to stop thinking about that, otherwise I'd get a major case of blue balls. "We have another few hours before we leave for the fundraiser," I added.

She cleared her throat. It was her telltale of nervousness. "I have something else I have to take care of before your fundraiser."

"What?" I questioned her.

The briefest of glances between her and Ella told me something was going on.

"Just some business." Her voice was calm but the graceful movement of her neck as she swallowed, told me she wasn't calm. In fact, she was the exact opposite. Rattled, nervous… almost scared.

I told myself not to lose my shit, to keep my temper under control, keep a lid on my jealousy. And I fucking lost. I always fucking lost around my wife. I wanted her everything and it made me blind as fuck. Just like my father and Cassio claimed.

"What kind of fucking business are you doing dressed like that?"

I acted like a damn jackass, startling Grace but she quickly got herself together.

"I didn't know you were back home," she answered in a soft voice, avoiding answering my question.

Fuck, she could read a damn recipe of chopped livers in her soft voice and I'd get a hard on.

"I sure am. Now, where are you going?"

"Out. For. Business."

I gritted my teeth, hating the idea of any man seeing her dressed hot like this. Or even worse, touching her.

“What fucking business? Shouldn’t you stay home with the baby?” It pissed me off to think of her going anywhere without me. “Besides, we are driving to the fundraiser together.”

Her delicate eyebrows frowned. “Nonno is watching Matteo. And I’ll meet you at the venue. I have to take care of something.”

“Who are you going with?” I hissed, jealousy eating at me. She rolled her eyes at me. “Did you just-”

“Yes, Luciano. Yes, I did. I just rolled my eyes at you.” Annoyance on her face and her voice portrayed agitation. But there was something else there too that I couldn’t decipher. “As you can see, Ella and I are busy. We will meet you at your venue if we can, text me the address. And now go get a damn life, and stay the hell out of mine.”

“I’m your husband,” I spat out.

“Jesus, I wish you’d stop saying that. Like it will make me do whatever *you* want me to do. We are pretty much separated,” she accented the word. “On our way to an annulment. You know the definition of annulment? Marriage never happened. So please, for the love of God, stop saying you are my husband.”

She turned her back to leave when I grabbed her forearm, getting into her face. “You can’t go out looking like that!” I growled low.

“You just said I looked stunning. What is your problem, Luciano?” she hissed. “Just because you dragged me back to get what you wanted, it doesn’t mean my life stops. I have things to take care of. So please don’t make this more difficult.”

“What things?” The moment I asked, I could see on her face she regretted her words.

“Let go of me, Luciano.” She tugged on her arm, trying to get the grip loosened. Her skin flushed and there was a hint of panic in her eyes.

“Where?”

“Where what?”

“Where are you going?”

“None of your business.”

“One of my drivers will take you.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes, end of discussion. Otherwise, you are going nowhere.” I have had enough of her rebellion. “I won’t have anything happen to you while you are under my roof.”

She threw her head back and laughed. Although there was no amusement in it.

“Seriously?” she asked. “There are so many words I could say now, but unfortunately I have no time. Fine, I’ll take your damn car, Luciano.”

She pulled her arm out of my hold and strode away from me, like a queen doing a catwalk. Fuck, she was sexy.

A chuckle interrupted my longing stare after my wife, and my head snapped to my best friend. “Luciano, that woman is your vice.”

“Shut up, fucker.” Another chuckle. “Just you wait. You’ll get it back.”

By now, Grace disappeared from my view. I fucking hated that she didn’t trust me. That she kept secrets from me. I wanted to help her. Yes, I fucked up big time. My wife and I had to sit down and have a talk; starting with the way our marriage commenced.

At least she took my driver and she wouldn’t be wide open. I would find out where he took them and send someone to keep an eye on her.

“Besides, Cassio, aren’t you scheming for your woman?” I decided to taunt my best friend. And I needed to relieve some of my frustration. “How is that going?”

His face turned dark. “Fucker!”

I chuckled. “Don’t like it when the tables are turned, do you?” I joked bitterly. He flipped me a bird but his expression was still dark. “Anything I can do to help?” I asked, sincerely hoping his life wouldn’t become a major cluster like mine was.

“Thank you, but no,” he muttered. “You have enough on your plate.”

That might be true but I’d like to see my best friend finally get the family he wanted. It was one thing all of us had in common. Thirst for a family. I was lucky with my parents and seeing the love they shared, I always knew eventually I’d want the same. My friends weren’t as lucky. Cassio’s and Luca’s father killed their mother. Nico’s mother was a major alcoholic, Alessio’s father was a sick perverted predator.

“Well, my offer stands,” I told him. “Anytime, anywhere.”

He nodded. “Likewise,” he offered, and no other words were needed.

Cassio and I continued our plans. The fundraiser would start in two hours. Vasili would meet us there along with his wife and Alexei. The latter

used to work with Cassio and I. A damn good enforcer. He could hunt down anyone, anywhere. When you hired Alexei, you knew without a doubt the hunted was dead. If only Alexei was still open for hire.

The door of my office burst open and Massimo ran in. Both Cassio and I turned our eyes to him in alarm.

“What is it?” Massimo looked disheveled, shaken.

“Where are the women?”

“They left about an hour ago.”

“Fuck.” His eyes darted like he was hoping by some miracle they’d reappear.

Dread pooled in my stomach. “Speak now.”

“Those two-” he searched for words. “They are going to get themselves killed.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Massimo rushed to my com system and hooked it up. “Roberto has been deleting surveillance footage. It’s been him all along.” What the fuck was he talking about?

“Massimo, you are not making any sense,” I barked out.

He picked up the remote and turned around facing us. “It was Roberto that betrayed our location three years ago.” Acid burned in my veins, fury feeding it with rage. “Ever since Grace got back, he has been deleting snaps of surveillance. He’s been working with the Romano and King family.”

Cassio and I shared a glance.

“How do you know?” I inquired. Roberto has been working for me for thirteen years. “He had never betrayed us before. Why three years ago? Why now?”

“He’s Alphonso’s son,” he hissed. “His fucking son.”

“Are you sure?” Cassio and I asked at the same moment. He would pay. I’d make him pay.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Massimo pushed his hand through his hair, making it an even bigger mess. “Grace and Ella discovered Alphonso had a kid. They have been digging, trying to find leverage against Alphonso, but they didn’t have any clues. No gender, no woman in Alphonso’s past, nothing.”

“I thought he’s playing for the other team,” I commented.

“He does. His relationship with Ian Laszlo is a long one. He impregnated a woman through in vitro treatment. One of the kidnapped

women. He wanted to make sure not to have a girl and was desperate for a descendant, his descendant, to the Romano line."

"Are you sure it is Roberto?"

"Yes, I located the records," he muttered. "Roberto's mother was killed after she gave birth. But her mother, Roberto's grandmother, lived to tell the tale."

"Why do you say they will get themselves killed?" Cassio inquired. "Are they going after Roberto?"

"No, after Sophia Romano and Alphonso. Neither Grace nor Ella are killers," he muttered frantically. "I have the surveillance that Roberto wiped out three years ago. When Grace's stuff came back, the chip we installed on her was among her stuff. By sheer luck, I decided to check it out."

"Play the footage." The fury was Arctic cold in my veins.

Her uncle's voice came through the speaker.

"I told you Luciano was bad news, Grace," her uncle scolded her. "He was trying to use you to destroy the Romano legacy."

Grace remained quiet. I wished we had a video surveillance of this, so I could see her face.

"Pull yourself together. I don't want your face all puffy."

"Yes." Fuck, my heart hurt at hearing her voice. I did that to her.

"Don't worry, Belle of the Season. We'll annul your marriage. A few months and you'll never remember him. What I have in store for you, you'll have a better criminal in your bed. Romano belles are a highly sought after commodity."

Silence. *"Fuck. You. Uncle."*

A loud slap sounded through, followed by a low whimper that almost sounded like a wounded animal. That fucking bastard hit her. He was dead. I couldn't wait to kill him.

"Don't tell me you are crying for that piece of shit," her uncle mocked in a taunting voice.

I didn't deserve her. Grace should have gotten so much better than me, but she was my wife. It was time we made the responsible people pay. It was never my wife's burden to bear. I learned that fucking lesson, now I just had to convince her to give us a chance. In the meantime, I'd burn down every single person that ever hurt her. I didn't give a shit if I did it in open retaliation. Fucking bastards deserved it.

"No, Uncle. Can I go to my room?"

“Might as well. You will be useless today. Tomorrow, I expect you to look your best.”

Footsteps echoed and the door closed. Then sobs broke through the audio. Hearing Grace cry felt like multiple stabs into my heart. A knock on the door and crying immediately stopped.

“Just a minute.” Shuffling and then the door opening.

“Ella, what are you doing here?”

“I have to tell you something.”

“Can it wait? It’s not the best time.”

“Your uncle plans on taking us both tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I wondered what they were talking about. Take her where?

“They expect to sell us tomorrow. The auction is tomorrow.”

“No.” I could hear the terror in her voice. *“Are you sure?”*

“Yes.” Another stretch of silence before Ella’s shaking voice came through. *“Could your husband help?”*

A pang in my heart. Grace needed me, and I wasn’t there. Damn it, she needed me, and I failed her.

“No, I think we are on our own.”

“But he married you.”

“It was about revenge. I don’t know all the details, but it doesn’t matter anymore. He thinks I betrayed him.“

“About what?”

“About some location he told me about.”

“Did you?”

“No.” Grace’s voice sounded tired. *“I think it’s Roberto. I saw him with Uncle once, but it was a few years back, when I was a kid. It was so long ago, a few months before Mom and Dad died. I caught my uncle threatening Mom backstage, in her dressing room. I didn’t know who he was and didn’t understand the words.”* She let out a bitter laugh. *“I certainly understand them now.”*

My chest squeezed. It wasn’t Grace.

“We could call him and tell him.” Ella’s voice sounded hopeful.

Another stretch of silence.

“It doesn’t matter, Ella. I’m leaving anyhow.” There was some noise and a crash. I shared a glance with Massimo.

“Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Oh my God, Grace. Are you-” Retching sounds came through, followed by throwing up. Confusion hit me. Was she sick? *“Are you pregnant?”*

“I’m done, Ella.” Grace’s voice shook. I was the worst bastard. There was my confirmation that Matteo was mine. No wonder she hated my guts. She should. I wouldn’t blame her if she killed me; I would let her, too. *“I’m done being everyone’s pawn. I’m leaving tonight.”*

“But your Uncle-”

“Will have me killed, one way or the other. He already controls my inheritance. And that’s not enough for him. He’s going to sell us. We have to run.”

“Does Luciano know about the pregnancy?”

A bitter laugh came through the air. *“I was going to tell him at dinner.”*

“You could call him.”

“I never want to see him again. As far as I’m concerned, they can all kill each other. I’m leaving and never looking back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Your uncle and the King’s family will hunt us relentlessly.”

“That’s why it has to be tonight.” Another stretch of silence. *“I could take the first flight out. To Europe. Any other continent but here.”*

“I’m coming with you then.”

A soft gasp.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I am not okay with being sold to settle my parent’s agreement either. It will be easier if we are together.”

“Ella, you’d have to leave it all behind.”

“There isn’t much to leave, is there?”

“Your whole life… phone, clothes, everything.”

“Why do we have to leave our phones behind?”

“I learned from my dear husband that burner phones are better, harder to trace.”

“Okay, phones left behind.”

“I need to get to my uncle’s safe. He has some cash stashed in there.”

“Do you know the code?”

“I think so. Luciano had a passport with a fake name done for me. It is still in my purse.”

“Won’t he know if we travel under his fake passport?”

“Yes, but my uncle won’t. The moment we get to Europe, I’ll ditch it, and we can make new identification. Do you have yours?”

“Yeah, I’ve been going around with my fake passport for a week.”

“You used that same contact of Luciano’s I gave you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then let’s steal some of my cash and get the fuck away from everyone.”

Grace never betrayed me. Matteo was mine. I hurt my wife and could have cost my son his life.

“Fuck,” Cassio muttered.

Yes, fuck.

“This next one is from two days ago and has a video along with audio. It was from Ella’s room. I had surveillance installed throughout the house until I worked up on hacking their phones. I didn’t bother checking it since I hacked into their phones. Roberto didn’t know about any of the installs I’ve done or upgrades I made.” *Thank fuck!* He switched the USB. “I installed the tracing in the surveillance room, throughout the house and a separate code on the software. I used whatever Ella and Grace have been using. That fucking Roberto has been the culprit all along.” Massimo pushed a hand through his hair. “Watch this.”

Massimo turned the large screen on, and the two best friends showed up on the screen. Both of them had tumbled hair, sitting on the bed in Ella’s room.

“I thought of something,” Grace told Ella. It must have been the morning she slept in my room. She wore one of my shirts that came down her knees. She was only five foot four and although my shirt hung too big on her, it made her look like mine. Not like… she was mine.

Ella must have worn Massimo’s shirt. I guess she was his.

“What?”

“My grandmother usually holds her annual gala every year. What if we made an appearance there? My uncle usually never misses it.”

I frowned. That was today. What are those two up to?

“Yeah, I remember but what good would that do?”

“We could take him and her down there.”

They stared at each other, and I wondered what they were thinking.

"I'll do it," Grace spoke softly. *"But that's not going to fix our problem in full though."*

"What do you mean?"

"Even with them gone, that agreement of selling me still stands. It has been standing for centuries. Same is true for your parents' agreement for you. My uncle might have ruined your family, but he sold that agreement to Benito King."

"What are you saying, Grace?"

"We have to kill all the Kings."

Cassio laughed, and my head snapped to him. It wasn't funny. I didn't want my wife anywhere near Marco and Benito King.

"You have to admire your wife," Cassio murmured, a small smile still on his face. "She has guts."

Didn't I know it!

"Are you suicidal?" Ella raised her voice slightly. *"We'd have to kill them all at the same time, otherwise they'll hunt us down. They know how to hunt and kill, we don't. And Grace, they wouldn't just kill us."*

"I know. But what other way could we ensure they never got their hands on us?" I watched Grace take a deep breath and then exhale. *"Gabriella, if they get their hands on us, we are dead anyhow."*

"Fuck."

"What about Cassio and Luca King?" Ella questioned.

"What about them?"

"Well, they are the Kings too."

Grace's delicate brows scrunched, as if she was debating whether she would kill them too.

"I don't know. They are Benito King's sons, but it is like they don't know anything about all this. We should probably kill them too."

Cassio chuckled and tried to quickly cover it with a cough. He failed.

"What if they are innocent?" Ella questioned, her face full of fear.

"And what if they aren't, Ella?" Did I do this to my wife? Did my actions force her to consider killing? I could see it clearly as day on her face she didn't like the idea of killings.

"They seem close friends with your husband," Ella murmured. *"And those five men, including your husband… I don't think we are a match for them."*

“I know. But what do we do if they decide to enforce the agreement? They are the Kings after all.”

“Jesus, we had dinner with them.”

“So we should let them kill us because we had dinner with them?”

“That is not what I am saying. But maybe we should consider they might not be connected to their father. I mean, you grew up under your uncle and have no connection to him. Maybe they are similar.”

“Fine, I’ll give you this one. Can you hack into their communication and see what the deal is with them? I don’t think we are a match for Cassio and Luca King anyhow. If their relationship with their father is similar to mine with my uncle, we’ll let them live.”

Ella chuckled, although it was strained. *“I swear, woman. You sound bloodthirsty, and we haven’t killed a single person yet.”*

There was one thing clear. These two belles would take shit from no mobster or any man for that matter. They would fight tooth and nail to keep their freedom and choice. Of course, they shouldn’t have to fight for it.

“I don’t really like the idea of killing anyone. But I really don’t want to be sold to some criminal.”

“I can tell,” Ella told her. *“You are still trying to get over your current one.*” Ella thought my wife was still into me. All of a sudden, I liked my wife’s friend very much.

“I am totally over the current one.”

“Right.”

“What does that mean?”

“Why don’t you just admit you are not over him?”

“I am!”

“No, you are not. Maybe your husband is not over you either.”

“Now you are just talking stupid. He was never into me so there is nothing for him to get over.”

“Right, that’s why he beat Ian like some madman… in the middle of a nightclub.”

“Why are we talking about him? We have this life and death situation over our heads, and we are debating whether Luciano is or isn’t into me. When we are dead, do you really think in the grand scheme of things it will matter?”

“So you think we won’t get out of this alive?”

“We’ll damn well try. Gabriella, what the fuck is the matter?”

“Well, I kind of want to get out of it alive. I like Massimo. Like a lot. I know you don’t like him. I don’t like Luciano for what he did to you. But I’m willing to give him a chance. Can you do the same for Massimo?”

She pushed her hands through that gorgeous hair, resignation all over her face.

“Sure, Ella. You know I love you, and I want you to be happy. However, I’m not asking you to give Luciano a chance. Both of those assholes pointed their guns at me. Besides, thinking about Massimo while we have the King family hunting for us along with the Romano family isn’t the right thing to do right now.”

“I know, I know. But I’m tired of running. And I just know it will be worse this time. It was hard watching you last time and your pregnancy was what helped us both get through. It was the only thing that drove us. What will we have this time?”

“We can’t bring Matteo along. It’s too risky. Luciano will make sure he is safe.”

“You have everything ready so he knows Matteo is his?”

My wife nodded but no other words left her lips.

I immediately called up my driver. “Bring my wife and her friend back,” I barked the moment he answered.

“Sir, they had me drop them off ten miles from the house.”

Fury at Grace’s recklessness and stubbornness irked my nerves. I hung up without another word and turned to Massimo. “Track their location.”

I might have sent her back into the vipers’ nest three years ago, but damn if I’d let her go back into it now.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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GRACE

"Thank you," I said to the Uber driver. I knew Luciano wanted us to take his driver so he knew our whereabouts. If Ella and I failed, I couldn't risk any of what we were about to do to be pinned to Luciano. For Matteo's sake.

The likelihoods of Ella and I killing Benito King were slim to none. If we succeeded with our plan, we'd run again. Somewhere the King family couldn't find us and sell us like stock. But first, I'd make my uncle and grandmother pay… for everything.

Needless to say, we haven't made it to Luciano's fundraiser yet. If my uncle was there, it would be easier to handle my grandmother alone. She wouldn't expect it, so we might have an element of surprise. Getting rid of one then the other might be our only way.

My five inch Louboutin's hit the pavement as we exited the car. The large, wedding cake style marble steps opened a magnificent view to a large mansion. The Romano Mansion that had been in my father's family for centuries. That I had never stepped foot in till I was twelve, after my uncle murdered my parents.

Taking one step at the time, Ella and I slowly made our way up to the entrance where the old butler awaited all guests. If he recognized me, he hid it well.

"Good evening," he greeted us. I nodded without a word. "The ballroom is straight ahead and take the second double door entrance on the left.

I didn't bother telling him I knew where it was. Ella and I both did. When her parents were killed by my uncle's actions, he only took her in so

he could protect his investment. He would make money off her, one way or the other.

We continued on, our heels slapping loudly against the marble floors. Although there was a party in full swing, it felt eerie, the echoes of our heels rattling my nerves.

We paused at the entrance of the ballroom, my nerves teetering on the edge. The glitzy, flashy ballroom of my ancestor's estate disguised all kinds of ugly. The wealth of the Romano family was made on the blood and tears of innocent women. I understood why my parents wanted nothing to do with my father's family. The knowledge of how they made their money tainted every single thing in its vicinity.

The room got a few notches quieter, the air just a bit more tense. Or maybe it was just me. My grandmother always made me feel small, unworthy. She hated me as much as she hated my mother, blaming her for taking her first-born from her. She blamed my mother for my father abandoning the family, when it was her filth that made him turn his back on the Romano name.

"I'm your grandmother, Sophia Romano." I had never known my father's family was alive. Neither one of my parents mentioned it. This woman didn't even come to the funeral.

Should I hug her, I wondered. I took a tentative step when her voice stopped me. "You are a firstborn female, and the only female, born to the Romano family line."

I didn't understand the words, nor the meaning behind her words. My eyebrows crunched in confusion, staring at the woman that stared at me with distaste.

What have I ever done to this woman?

My hands clenched around the book I held. It was actually an album with my parents' pictures. The only object I brought along. They forbid me to bring anything, not even my clothes.

"You look more like your mother than my Kennedy." My grandmother's dark eyes flashed with cruelty and hate. "But you'll make a good belle for a mobster when you come of age."

I wrapped both my hands around my album, pressing it against my aching heart. I didn't understand what this woman was saying. If Grandma and Grandpa Astor were still alive, I'd live with them. But they died last

year. And now I lost my parents. It felt like I lost all my family, to be left alone in this world.

A single, lonely tear rolled down my face. I had cried many of those since my parents died and the ache never eased.

"Wipe that shit off your face, girl," my grandmother smirked.

I just needed my own room, so I could hide and watch the photos of my mom and dad. It would ease the sting to think about our happy times. Just think about happy times, my mother always said.

As if my grandmother read my thoughts, her eyes lowered to my chest where I gripped the album like my life depended on it.

"What is that?" she questioned.

"A book." Technically not a lie.

A slap across my cheek had my head whipping to the left, a burning sting flaming across my right cheek.

"Don't ever lie to me again, girl." I swallowed hard, a terror settling into my bones. I had never been hit before. "Give it to me."

"No." My voice was small but firm. Don't ever let them clip your wings, Grace! *My mother's words were still with me. Did she know this was going to happen?*

She took a step forward, and instinctively I took one back. But not fast enough. Her cold hands grabbed the collar of my dress and a shredding sound tore through the front of the driveway. From the corner of my eye, I spotted ravens. Their cawing sound rattled me to my bones, and I was just as frightened as they were by this human. The loud, spooky black birds flew away, leaving me alone with the stranger in nothing more than my underwear.

I gripped the book, covering my chest, and I felt my lower lip tremble, threatening violent sobs to let loose. I bit it hard, to keep any sounds from coming out.

"The book." Her wrinkled hand extended; she tapped her foot impatiently.

"No." Stubbornness was one of my weaknesses. It was something my mother and father always told me.

My grandmother shifted her gaze behind me. "Take her to her room."

One of the housekeepers gently nudged me, and I followed her into the house with a relieved breath. My body shivered as I followed the maid's rushed steps, whether because of cold or fear, I wasn't sure.

This place would never be home. I knew it the moment I stepped my foot through the door.

Two days later, I found my album burning in the fireplace, and along with it, every single, happy piece of my childhood.

I straightened and raised my chin, shoving all my fears into a dark corner of my mind. We could do this; Ella and I didn't survive the last three years to cower now.

"Ready?" Ella whispered next to me.

"No, but we'll get it done anyhow," I murmured, under my breath.

I strode through the room, like I owned it, placing a smile on my face.

"Ah, Miss Romano, so nice to see you." It was my grandmother's bodyguard, Charles. He knew very well I was married.

"It is Mrs. Vitale." Luciano's voice came behind me, startling me. They must have taken a direct route to my grandmother's to get here so quickly.

I glanced behind me to find him with Cassio, Nico, Massimo, and Luca. There was also a couple, and a man I hadn't recognized before. I should have objected to Luciano's interruption, but I was glad to see him there. He was the lesser of two evils.

Charles ignored him. "Your grandmother will be pleased to see you."

He strode away, and I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Fancy seeing you here, wife."

"Why?" I retorted back. "After all, I used to live here. Remember?" They were the worst years of my life but no sense dwelling on that now. My eyes travelled over the group. "And you all are here, why?" I questioned them with a raised eyebrow. All of them watched me, like they were debating whose side I was on.

My son's side. My side. Ella's side. I'd ensure we'd get out of this alive. *Somehow*.

My eyes traveled to a young woman and her companions. It was obvious those three came together. Her dark hair and brown eyes complemented their blonde features. It was an odd contrast, but it worked in their favor. My eyes traveled over her slim features, and I only now noticed she was pregnant. The swell of her belly attractively accented her soft features.

She looked small, too frail and short next to the two tall and stocky men. They both looked like some damn MMA fighters, their large frames towering over the woman. Those two men had to be brothers with the eyes

they shared, the palest blue eyes I had ever seen. Even their facial structure was similar. She held hands with one of them, leading me to believe they were an item. And the way that guy held her protectively told me he'd kill anyone that even dared look at her wrong.

The other man stood on the other side of her. But unlike the other guy that only had tattoos on his hands, this guy was all tatted up. He even had tattoos on his face. In fact, every visible inch of skin displayed striking and beautiful ink. He looked scary and beautiful at the same time.

"Grace, this is Vasili Nikolaev and his wife Isabella. They live in New Orleans." Ah, another mobster! I should have known. "And Alexei Nikolaev is Isabella's brother."

I frowned. "Ummm, incest?" Shit, did I say that out loud?

The tattooed guy growled, and instinctively, I took a step backwards, right into the hard, marble chest of my husband. "No, not incest," the beautiful, face-tattooed guy answered darkly. "Isabella and I are half-siblings by my mother."

"Alexei and I share a father," Vasili deadpanned. At least he wasn't growling at me. "It's a bit complicated."

"Yeah, family tends to be pretty damn complicated," I muttered.

Alexei nodded, as if agreeing. I wondered what their story was. I bet they didn't have some historical agreement of selling their daughters hanging over their necks.

My eyes indulged, traveling over his ink and inventorying each visible tattoo. From the ones on his face, the ink peeking above his starched white dress shirt, down to his tattooed hands and knuckles. Fuck, he was beautiful. I never cared much for tattoos until Luciano. But this man took ink to a whole new level. The ink on this man, it packaged the cruelty etched on his face, the art and ruthlessness, into one fine, deadly specimen.

"Grace, you have come back." The interruption came in the form of my grandmother's cold voice. My mouth pressed into a thin line, and something in Alexei's eyes told me he understood exactly where I was coming from.

My heart rate sped up and anxiety kicked up a notch, but I kept it hidden. After all, I got really good at hiding my emotions since I started living under my grandmother's roof.

She offered me her cheek to kiss in greeting. I leaned in stiffly to kiss the offering and felt like Judas. Because I came to kill her. But I

remembered the lesson well from the last time when I refused to kiss her cheek. She starved me for two days. It wasn't something easily forgotten.

"Grandma," I murmured.

"I see you are still hanging out with the riff raff." Her eyes traveled over Luciano and his friends and ended with Ella. Her lips pursed at the sight of my best friend. "I thought you left your husband, my little Belle."

Don't let her taunt you. Don't let her taunt you. The words played on repeat in my brain.

She purposely called me that, reminding me that was my only worth to the Romano legacy. Well, I didn't give a fuck about the Romano legacy.

A hard gleam entered her eyes. She was hoping to get Luciano worked up. He kept his calm, although I felt more than saw him stiffen.

Never looking his way, I answered. "No. Someone must have given you the wrong information about my marriage status. I kind of like being riff raff, so only appropriate I hang out with them. Don't you think so, Grandmother?"

I wasn't a little girl anymore. I wouldn't take her mental beating, nor my uncle's physical abuse.

She smiled, although it didn't reach her eyes. "Will you play for us today, dear?"

"No, I-"

"Your mother's piano is here," she cut me off as if I hadn't spoken. "Tonight will be your last chance. We are getting rid of it."

I blinked in confusion. "But why? It was in Mom's family for centuries."

"It has no purpose here." We locked gazes, her dark black eyes staring me down, challenging me. Unlike my uncle who didn't mind physical punishment, my grandmother preferred mental torture.

"I'll take it." The words escaped me before I thought better of them. She liked to take away everything I cared for or loved. Now that I expressed that I wanted it, she'd rather burn it to the ground than let me have it.

"You were always so sentimental, Grace," she mocked me. "It will be your downfall. That piano is worthless. Just like your little family."

Unspoken threat. Unspoken humiliation.

I took a step forward, when I felt Ella's hand wrap around my upper arm. I envisioned myself wrapping my fingers around her neck and choking

her to death. I wanted to kill that mean, old witch. The only thing she was good at was bringing misery to people.

Before I could think of a comeback, my husband stepped in.

“You watch yourself, Sophia Romano,” Luciano got in her face, a menacing and ruthless mobster in full mode. “My wife might keep things civil for your party, but I won’t have any qualms about ripping out your throat and seeing you choke on your own blood among your guests.”

My grandmother didn’t even bat an eyelash, but I did see her guards near her. Of course, she wasn’t scared when she never fought her own battles.

“The piano is worthless,” she continued, as if Luciano never spoke. “You don’t have a daughter and won’t have a chance to spawn another child.”

Luciano growled next to me, but I put my hand on his bicep, squeezing lightly.

“Truthfully, it belongs to me, Grandmother,” I spoke, seemingly calm although every ounce of blood inside me boiled with fury. The interruption was welcome because it diverted her attention from Luciano to me. “After all, my parents left it all to me. Didn’t they?”

“To be turned over to you on your twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Or when I got married.” My lips curved into a fake smile. “And I am married.” I glanced sideways at my husband. “Aren’t I, darling?”

“We sure are married, Tesoro.” Luciano smirked at my grandmother, his eyes shooting all kinds of menace her way.

“Go play one of those vulgar songs you like so much,” she continued as she strode away, ignoring both of us. “Say goodbye to your mother’s legacy. The last heirloom and generation of the Astor family will soon be gone in ashes.”

I dug my fingernails into the palm of my hand, focusing on the pain to ground me. She wouldn’t win. My uncle wouldn’t win. The Astor legacy would never burn into ashes. Because Matteo was part of me too.

I turned my head towards my husband, locking eyes with Luciano. “Call your father and tell him not to leave the house with Matteo,” I spoke low, my voice shaking.

Without another word, I walked away from the group, my back stiff as I heard my grandmother make the announcement. I could feel his eyes,

staring at me even with my back to him. Oddly enough, it was comforting to know that my husband was here. It gave me the extra courage I needed.

“Everyone, thank you so much for coming,” she greeted the audience. “Grace Romano will be playing a piece for us tonight. I am sure many of you have heard of her world famous mother, Aria Astor, who captured the world with her voice as well as took my firstborn's heart.”

There was a double meaning to all her words. The blame she placed on my mother when in fact it was her own actions that cost her the firstborn. She lost her own son, nobody else did it for her.

“Grace Vitale,” I interrupted with a tight smile, speaking into the microphone to ensure everyone heard. “Not Romano.”

Her beady, cruel eyes flashed to me with hatred and I smiled. She would pay for her sins if it was the last thing I did before I died. Death of my grandmother and uncle would mean protection for Matteo. And for my son’s safety, I’d sell my soul to the devil.

It was the Romano’s turn to lose.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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LUCIANO

Grace paled at her grandmother's words, and it made me want to wrap my hand around that old witch's neck. I never liked Sophia Romano. She was a cruel and twisted old woman. But today I liked her even less.

I quickly dialed up my father. When there was no answer, I called Lorenzo, my top guard.

"Boss."

"Any word on Roberto?" I asked. After we found out he was the traitor, I hired Sasha, Vasili's other brother, to find him and eliminate him. Sasha Nikolaev was good, not as good as Alexei, but he would hunt that motherfucker down and put a sniper bullet into his skull.

"No, but Sasha's on the trail."

"Good. Tell my father not to leave the house with the boy. Keep security tight. If something happens, protect the boy and my father at all costs. I'll update you later."

I hung up and saw my wife's step falter at her grandmother's announcement. I wished I knew what my wife's plan was. She wanted to kill them; I knew that. But she couldn't do that here. Not in such a public place.

Fuck it; I was done letting that fucking evil witch play with my wife's life. I took a step forward, ready to put a stop to it all.

"Don't you dare move, Luciano." My head snapped to Ella. Who in the fuck did she think she was? "You are going to get her killed," she hissed.

“What the hell is going on here?” I demanded in a low voice, keeping the anger from my expression.

“Just don’t do anything. Not right now,” Ella muttered, her eyes on Grace as she sat herself on the piano. “You almost cost her her life once before. Don’t repeat it.”

What the hell are these two up to?

Ella’s gaze traveled behind me, and I followed her gaze. Sophia’s bodyguard was leering at her, and she visibly paled.

“Just don’t do anything now,” she whispered and took a step backwards, her eyes locked on the bodyguard the entire time.

Massimo must have seen the same, because he came behind Ella, ready to protect her.

“What’s the matter?” I asked her. She shook her head, remaining numb and frozen. “Nobody is getting to you or Grace.”

She swallowed hard, but something told me, just like my wife, she didn’t believe it.

“Just keep your eyes on her guards,” she uttered in a low voice.

I noticed the Romano family had their men everywhere. It didn’t matter because they were no match for us. Our men were also outside and Raphael Santos wasn’t far behind either. After we discovered Grace’s plan, we diverted our plan from the fundraiser to here. We had one of our event managers step in for us. On the way here, Cassio gave a brief overview to the men so they understood what we were up against. At all costs, save Grace and Ella.

I appreciated Vasili and Alexei coming along, though I was worried about Isabella Nikolaev being so close to the two men that almost kidnapped her. So was her husband because he kept his hand close to his weapon. Maybe we were all eager to end Alphonso and Benito, once and for all. Criminals or not, we all wanted to enjoy our life. Benito King’s associates were a different brand of criminals. More like psychopaths.

I had to admit that I was surprised that Benito King wasn’t here, considering the tight business relationship between the King and Romano family.

The soft piano notes sounded in the room, and Ella along with everyone else was forgotten behind me. Massimo would be at her back, protecting her. Vasili would protect his woman, and the rest of us were capable of standing our own.

The light tunes of Gnossiennes No. 1 played, the recognition immediate in my memory. How could I ever forget it? They were the same tunes she played that night during our short marriage, when the evening ended with me fucking her bent over my grand piano.

Everyone's eyes were turned to Grace's form as she sat, her fingers drifting across the keys. I had seen her play the piano only a handful of times. She loved it, the music was part of her.

From those short months we had together and how she talked about music, I knew she loved it. But I never realized how much till just this moment. I watched my wife's face mesmerized by her transformation. It was as if the whole world ceased to exist for her. Her fingers moved expertly across the piano, her eyelids lowered, her expression distant and soft. Like that of a woman dreaming of her lover, of the day she could hold him again. There was pain, love, softness, hope on her face. She was completely lost in the music.

"Your wife plays beautifully, Luciano," Vasili's wife, Isabella, whispered softly, her voice full of awe. "I'm getting goosebumps from listening to it. She's amazing."

Yes, she is. I had been so consumed with revenge when I married her, I never took time to get to know my wife. I kidnapped her, forced her to marry me, and then became obsessed with her.

It was a rocky start for us. But it was our start, and we'd have a future. Together.

My eyes traveled to the audience. Isabella wasn't the only one transfixed and lost in the music. Every single pair of eyes were on my wife, soaking up the music. Except for Sophia Romano. Hers were full of hate as she watched her granddaughter.

"Raphael said Alphonso never showed up to the fundraiser." Cassio's voice was quiet. "He might be here."

I nodded in acknowledgement. How did I never see that my wife and I were on the same side? Was I truly that blind when it came to my beautiful, strong wife? The hate and animosity between Grace and her grandmother seeped out of both of them. Even when my wife talked about her grandmother or uncle when we first got married, there was never any love or affection in her words.

Revenge blinds you, son. My father's words vibrated through my blood, and never a truer statement was uttered.

Grace’s fingers gracefully moved across the keys of the piano. From the short, tense interaction between her and her grandmother it was clear she loved that piano. I would get that piano for her, if it was the last thing I did in this life.

The last tune of the song ended, and it was like watching Grace wake up from a dream. Her soft, dreamy expression disappeared and turned into a guarded expression. She met her grandmother’s expression by tilting her chin up in a challenge.

The young, gentle girl I picked up at the club almost four years ago was now gone. In its place stood a strong and resilient woman that would fight the world to protect those she loved. And whether she liked it or not, I would fight right alongside her. She was my family. My life. My everything. She might not need me anymore to survive, but I needed her. And Matteo.

I have a son. From the moment the realization struck, it was hard to grasp the meaning of it all. I would spend the rest of my life making it up to my wife and son. My father was right. Grace was innocent all along.

Her uncle stepped up from the side, entering her line of vision and my wife’s shoulders barely stiffened, but she held her own.

“That will be all from-”

“I’m not done.” Grace’s eyes traveled between her grandmother and her uncle. Locking on her uncle, she remained seated. I could see on her grandmother’s face she was furious, but Grace paid her no attention. All Grace’s attention was on her uncle. The whole room was quiet, not even breathing could be heard. “This one should bring up memories, Uncle,” she spoke softly, undertone of sarcasm in her tone. “Remember how it started.”

Her fingers started dancing across the keyboard again, the tones from the piano vaguely familiar. She didn’t tear her gaze from her uncle, her expression daring him to say or do something.

“Is that “Listen to Your Heart” by Roxette?” I heard Isabella ask Vasili Nikolaev, her husband, in a hushed tone. “That’s kind of an abrupt music genre switch,” she muttered.

She was right; now that she said it, I recognized it. But what was the meaning of it? Why was Grace watching her uncle with such defiance while he stared at her like he wanted to murder her?

“That was her parents’ song,” Ella whispered. “It was the last song her mother performed before Alphonso had her parents killed.”

Shock vibrated through me, and I heard Isabella's soft gasp. I would kill her uncle with pleasure. He should have been a dead man a long time ago.

I saw Alphonso step closer to my wife, and it took all within me not to reach for my gun. I didn't need to look to know my friends felt the same. But Alphonso Romano, while snaking around like a dirty lizard, didn't physically threaten. He had a sneaky smile on his pale, small face accented with black beady eyes. Sophia Romano and Alphonso Romano shared their features - thin, pale, dark hair and beady eyes. Same sneaky, backstabbing personality too. The only difference, one wore a skirt and the other wore pants.

They will both be dead before the night is over, I vowed. For the pain they caused my wife, my mother, my sister, and my father. And to protect my son.

Alphonso's lips barely moved, but there was no mistake that he whispered something to my wife. Whatever he said had Grace's jaw clenched, and the music stopped mid song with Grace slamming the keyboard cover down, covering the keys.

Every single pair of eyes in the room were on them with anticipation. The air stilled, hushed gasps echoed, and the room fell silent. It was a grim kind of silence that led to a moment that would mark a catastrophe, like pulling out my gun and shooting that fucker Alphonso clear across the room and starting a full-blown war.

Grace stood up from the piano stiffly, her eyes never wavering from her grandmother and uncle. While the latter two kept artificial smiles on their faces, Grace's expression was stoic. She wouldn't give them the pleasure of faking anything. My wife has grown a spine and spread her wings.

She neared her grandmother and spoke into the microphone, her eyes locked on the man and woman that should have protected her but instead sold her out.

"Thank you for letting me play for you." Grace's soft voice boomed through the microphone. "My grandmother decided generously to have my mother's piano transported to my husband's place instead of burning it to ashes." She paused, letting the meaning sink in. "Isn't that wonderful? We should give a round of applause."

Grace's voice dripped with sarcasm, but the audience either ignored it or didn't pick up on it.

"I really like your wife," Vasili Nikolaev deadpanned.

“Oh, this is nothing. You should see her hit list.” Cassio chuckled, half-serious and half-joking. “I believe Alphonso and Sophia Romano along with the King family are at the top of that list.”

“Smart woman,” Nico chimed in, and I could hear a smile in his voice.

Ignoring them all, I watched Grace disappear behind the heavy, plush red curtains.

“What’s back-” Turning to face Ella, I realized she was gone. “Where is Ella?” I questioned Massimo.

“Goddamn it,” Massimo gritted. “Why is it that those two always sneak away without being noticed?”

“Probably because they got good at it,” Alexei answered, unperturbed.

“Can you all split up, and keep an eye out?” The Romano’s better not touch one single hair on my wife’s head. I’d tear them up limb to limb.

“Go find your wife,” Cassio uttered. “We got this.”

I rushed towards the curtain that Grace disappeared behind, but the room behind it was empty. A large backstage had a single wooden chair placed by the window, and nothing else.

I rushed across the wooden floors towards the single door. They had to go through it, there was no other way out. Either through this door or back through the ballroom.

The door took me to the back of the hallway, the marble back stairs leading to the staff area. The waiting staff was busy going back and forth, not paying attention to the fact they had a stranger hanging out in this area. It told me it probably happened often.

While the front of the house shone, the servants’ area was darker with lifeless colors. It reflected Romano’s disregard for those lesser than themselves. At our house, we often spent time in the kitchen, along with our staff. They were pretty much part of our family.

The sounds of the staff working bounced off the bare walls, the sound traveling both ways. An older woman, with wrinkles and pain etched on her face, passed by me for the second time. She threw me a curious glance but said nothing. *Years of training and fear*, I presumed.

“Did you see Grace, the Romano niece, pass by here?” I asked her.

Recognition flashed in her eyes and her eyes darted around us, as if she wanted to ensure nobody was around.

“They went to the back gardens and through the maze.”

“Thank you.”

“I can’t find a sign of them,” Massimo’s voice reached behind me and the woman paled.

“You have nothing to fear from us,” I assured her. “If you want to leave this place, we can help.”

She nodded her acknowledgement. “Help Miss Grace first. Miss Ella too. They don’t deserve what Mrs. Romano has in store for them.”

I intended to. Both Massimo and I rushed through the back door, while Massimo sent a quick message that the ladies were somewhere in the back garden. The second we stepped outside, I spotted the maze and ran towards it. I wore a tuxedo, but I always combined every outfit with combat style shoes that would allow me to run. I never depended on my men to protect me. We protected each other.

The green bush of the entrance into the maze was empty, but a shred of black material hung ripped on one of the branches. *They took her this way!*

Up close the hedgerows are roughly eight feet tall, a perfect manicured green maze with the lingering scent of the last days of the summer. The maze would be my path to my prize. *My wife.* I would find her, protect her, and cherish her with my last dying breath.

On the second turn, both Massimo and I came to a halt. Alphonso Romano waited for us with ten guards at the second turn into the maze. That piece of shit was expecting us. His gun raised, he pointed at us and his men mimicked the movement.

Fucking coward! Always hiding behind his men.

“Not a step further, Vitale,” he spat out. “Or your wife will get a bullet into that pretty skull of hers.”

“You lay a finger on her,” I gritted, “and there is nowhere on this Earth you can hide. I’ll burn this world down till I get my hands on you and kill you. You fucking piece of shit.”

His beady gaze glanced at his men to ensure they were still there. *Yes, you piece of shit, better pray they don’t leave you.* He was a dead man; it was only a matter of time.

Massimo and I both had our guns trained on Alphonso and his men. Eleven against two; I had worse odds before. I would pull through, if only to save my wife.

A gun echoed in the distance and a woman’s scream pierced through the night. Without another delay, both of us drew guns simultaneously and started shooting.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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GRACE

Fear rattled my bones. I had never felt so scared before. Not when my parents died, not when my husband pointed the gun to my head, not when Ella and I ran away in the dead of the night with nothing but the clothes on our back, fake passports, and ten thousand dollars in cash.

These men, my grandmother planned to hand us over to, would not be kind to Ella and I. They waited four long years for us, stocking their anger and thirst for vengeance. A shiver ran down my spine with fear of their plans. I had no doubt their plans for us were to inflict pain. Hit, beat, brand, rape… death would be more merciful than this.

"Get a move on, *puttanas*," one of the guards snapped as he shoved both Ella and I forward.

My grandmother's laugh chilled me to the bone.

"Don't mind him, girls," she chatted, in her raspy voice. Result of years of smoking. "Marco King is eager to have you, Grace. And Ella should fetch a nice price too."

"Luciano Vitale will destroy you." Ella hissed. "You nor Marco King were able to find us. Grace's husband did. He will find her and kill-."

Her threats were cut off by a slap on her face and a mocking laughter. I wrapped my arm around her waist, pulling her closer to me.

"That wasn't necessary," I scolded my grandmother. "I'd think you would want us to look our best for your human auction."

"Move faster," one of the guards barked.

I didn’t bother looking behind me to see who it was. It didn’t really matter. We started walking, or risked one of us getting another slap. I snaked my free hand under the slit of my dress to reach for the gun I tucked under there. Ella hid my movement with her body. Every inch and each second ticked loud in my ears, bringing us closer to the doom.

Suddenly, without a warning, I halted my step, Ella following my lead. I whipped around and met my grandmother’s gaze head on. The cruel, dark eyes on me without an ounce of regret for what she was about to do.

Can I end a life? My hand with the small gun hid behind me, pressed against the tall bush.

Above me, stars flickered over the horizon of the night sky. The moon shone over the dark sky, giving me a clear view of what I had to do.

She took two steps towards me. Her small frame shouldn’t have been threatening, but years of her dishing punishments, made my body instinctively stagger backwards.

“Stop delaying the inevitable, Grace. You’ll be put up for auction to the highest mobster bidder and Marco King will outbid them all. He has been waiting for you for a long time.”

Three.

Two.

One.

From the back, I brought my arm forward and raised it with a firm grip on the gun. Just like I was taught in our class.

Don’t hesitate.

Keep a firm handle.

Shoot.

Without delay or another thought, I pulled the trigger.

Click.

My grandmother’s piercing scream colored the night and she swayed, tumbling down onto her side; her face planted into the dirt. *Very metaphorical!* Before I could ponder on the morality of my actions, I pulled the trigger again, this time hitting one of the guards. And again.

I’ll think later about the fact I hurt someone. Right now, I was thirsty for revenge and driven by the need to survive.

I felt an arm wrap around me from behind. My eyes widened, panic surged through me, and I started kicking. I saw Ella doing the same from

the corner of my eye, but I couldn't twist my body enough to elbow kick him before I felt a prick in my neck.

My whole world turned black.

THE SILENCE AND PITCH BLACKNESS WERE THE ONLY THING THAT registered. My eyelids were stone heavy. I kept them shut, focusing on my breathing and listening for any other noise I could possibly zero in on. I felt weak, like I had been run over by a car.

The fog in my brain started clearing, and I heard a small whimper, like a one from a wounded animal. *Is someone crying?*

And then sounds of the waves crashing against the shore. Why did it smell different than our little villa? I couldn't hear any Italian words carrying on the breeze like I usually could. The smell of the sea was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. It wasn't Italy.

I kept my eyes shut too long, my brain and thoughts distorted. What was the last thing I remembered? The haze in my head made it hard to recall the events before I went to sleep.

Finally mustering enough strength, I forced myself to peel my eyelids open. The second I did, a severe headache shot through my temples. Through a blanketed, cloudy haze, my vision slowly cleared.

Darkness clouded my sight and waves of nausea hit me. I closed my eyes, focused on my breathing and forced down the bile in my throat back.

Concentrate on your surroundings, the facts. Peeling my eyes open again, a glimmer of the moonlight peeking through the small window highlighted the outline of the room. I focused on the moonshine, waiting for my brain to clear the fog sloshing through my thinking process.

Every corner of the room was enveloped in darkness, the moonlight unable to reach them. The room was warm, too warm, and a metallic smell invaded my nostrils. A small part of me recognized it but my brain was too slow to register it.

Blood.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced myself to remember how I got here. Anything from before…

Ella and I left the house, Luciano arguing with me about my outfit. Cassio was there too. They both wore tuxedos. *The gala!*

We went to my grandmother's fundraiser. I played the piano and my uncle showed up. He threatened to have Roberto blow up Luciano's mansion with his father in it unless I went with him and Grandma quietly. He didn't mention Matteo, but my grandmother hinted to my little family. They knew about Matteo. I had no choice but to go with him or risk Matteo and his grandfather being killed.

Memories flooded back in a rush, and the choking fear was the only emotion lingering in my veins. Ella and I were hustled through the maze. I pulled the trigger on my grandmother. I killed her.

I think. I hope so.

Man's hands around my throat, against my mouth, sharp prick into my neck. The pain. Ella's screams. We were trapped - like a moth against the blinding light. Except this light would kill us.

Ella and I have been living on borrowed time.

Hushed murmurs penetrated my brain. I tried to move, but my body felt too heavy. Like I had been drugged. My heart thundered painfully, my skin felt clammy and cold, my head pounded.

Soft murmur and a whimper. A painful grunt escaped my lips, and I twisted my neck in the direction of the soft voices.

"Grace." A soft whisper. *Gabriella.*

I blinked back my tears and forced myself to keep my racing heart together. *She is alive.*

Frantically, I searched out for the familiar face. I could hear her, but couldn't see her. I scanned the darkness, and that's when I spotted her. Ella's small body slumped in the corner, her arms around her knees, her face pale and cheek bruised with long messy blonde hair surrounding it.

My chest squeezed. Ella was here; she was still breathing. Although right now, I wished both of us were dead. What awaited us was worse than death. I squeezed my eyes shut again, my body tired. *Maybe this is a nightmare.*

"Grace, please wake up," a whimpered voice. I forced my eyelids open and found Ella's honey gaze on me. We had to be strong. "Oh my gosh," she cried softly. "I was so scared. You've been out for so long."

I opened my mouth to comfort her but my throat was so dry, no words came out.

“Here, take a drink.” She crawled over to me, twisted and reached out to a single table in this prison of ours. Bringing a glass of water to my lips, she whispered, “Open your mouth.”

I did as she requested and sipped down some water. “Where are we?” I rasped the question.

“Benito King’s men got us. Do you remember?”

I closed my eyes again. Yes, I remembered but wished I didn’t. We were so stupid, made ourselves wide open for my family’s taking. My temples pounded so hard, making this headache unbearable. At least my grandmother was dead. Too bad we didn’t kill my uncle too, but he stayed behind when we pushed through the maze.

“I heard them say that your uncle is dead,” she whispered as if she heard my thoughts. “Luciano killed him.”

Relief. My uncle was dead and my husband finally got his revenge. And hopefully, my aim was deadly when I shot my grandmother. If only Ella and I didn’t have to pay with our own lives.

“More water, please,” I asked.

I took another gulp. And then another. Finally I sat up, ignoring my pounding headache. Slowly, the events that led us here cleared through my brain. Ella and I in the maze with my grandmother, me shooting her, the guard attacking. There were too many of them.

“Where are we?” I asked again.

“I don’t know.” Ella had an expression of fear. “One of the men put a needle into your neck. You lost consciousness. But we didn’t spend a lot of time in the car. I think we are still close to New York.”

I glanced around me. I had to find a way out of here. We would not spend the rest of our lives under any mobster’s thumb or as his income. We were in a closed room, a metal door locking us in.

One single window.

It was the only weakness in this room. My gaze slowly shifted back to Ella and as we stared at each other, I could only *see* them in my mind. *My husband. My son.*

I had to see them again. Life couldn’t be so cruel to end us this way.

“Could we escape through the window?”

Ella’s honey colored eyes lowered, and I followed her gaze. They stripped me down to my underwear and bra. My head snapped to Ella, and I just now noticed she was stripped down to her undergarments too.

“Besides, we are really high up,” she muttered.

All the years and Benito King’s men had finally gotten their dirty paws on us. Benito, just like my uncle, represented all that was evil. To me, he was the face of evil. He’d sell his soul to the devil, as long as he got what he wanted. These men didn’t care who they hurt in the process. How many women had these men hurt? How many daughters had they killed?

The screams and cries echoed through the hollow hallway and both of us instantly tensed. My gaze shot to the locked door, watching it and praying it remained shut.

A shiver ran through me, whether from the cold or the terror I could hear in those high pitched screams, I didn’t know. I pulled Ella up next to me and we both cuddled up, sharing body heat.

“How long was I out for?” I whispered my question.

“A whole day.”

“Have screams-” I couldn’t finish my question.

“Yes, from the moment we arrived.” Ella looked weak and tired. “I didn’t want both of us to sleep, in case-” she swallowed. “In case someone came.”

I nodded. It was what we did those first few months when we roamed Europe all alone. We never slept at the same time, so we wouldn’t make ourselves vulnerable.

“Try to get some sleep now,” I whispered, pulling her arm around my waist and welcoming the extra heat. “You need the rest.”

She laid her head onto my lap and I sat like a statue, staring out the small window, a glimpse of the freedom so close but so far away. I wasn’t beyond crawling through it and running down the street in my underwear. If I had to choose between that or being sold, I’d pick the former.

Ella’s eyes shut and her breathing evened within five minutes. I waited, listening to her breathing while I stared at the dirty concrete walls, then the dirty ground. It was all dirty, like this whole transaction that my family participated in.

My parents were dead because they tried to protect me. They refused to hand over their daughter as some kind of fucked up sacrifice to the mobster gods. I had never been bloodthirsty, but now, I wanted to kill them all.

I killed a human being. How did someone move on from that? It stained your soul, whether you wanted it or not. It was the main reason why I only

stuck to laundering money during our time in Europe. That was bad enough, but now I added killing to my repertoire.

It felt like the walls were closing in on me, making it hard to breathe. I didn't want to die; I knew that for certain. Ella and I were thrown into this whole mess, not of our own choosing. We shouldn't have to pay the ultimate sacrifice.

We have to survive somehow!

We ran away once, by sheer luck we escaped unscathed. It would be a miracle to get lucky again. My throat choked with the knowledge I wouldn't see my son grow up. Or Luciano age.

I turned my gaze out the small window, the only illusion of freedom, and stared out at the full moon. The chill in the air made the room smell moldy, but I ignored it. Instead, I focused on the bright moon and the sounds of the night echoing throughout.

I recalled the similar reflection of the moon mere weeks ago while Ella and I sat on the balcony of our little villa. The reflection against the surface of the waves, the constant sound of the waves crashing into the world. It was so peaceful. We ignored all the problems so we could enjoy that little piece of heaven.

"Please keep him safe, Luciano," I whispered to the moon.

That was the main thing that mattered to me now. My son would live to grow up into a good man. My uncle and grandmother were dead. There were no threats from my family anymore.

My eyes lowered to Ella and her curled up form. I wished she'd escaped, maybe stayed behind in Italy. It was her best chance at survival. We both knew the moment we stepped foot in the U.S. it was only a matter of time before the Romano family or the Kings got their hands on us.

As Ella slept, the only company left were my memories. I refused to think about the bad before we face the horrors. I would hang on to the good memories, both with Luciano and our son.

That moment Luciano and I crossed paths, my entire world shifted. Yes, the bastard pulled the gun on me, but I couldn't even solely blame him. It was the result of grief after his own mother's and sister's untimely death. Maybe I should have shouted at him that I was pregnant, told him my family was out to get me and hurt me as much as him… but I didn't. So maybe we both fell short. We created the most beautiful life, our Matteo,

and all the pain was worth it. I just hoped Luciano got the letter I left with the lawyer by now.

I wish the window was bigger. I'd rather jump out of it with the slim chance of freedom than remain locked here and live.

This window to freedom was cruel. It was like tempting a thirsty man with a glass of water but keeping it out of his reach. My heart beat against my ribcage, each pump with Luciano in my blood and Matteo in each shuddering breath I took.

A night breeze swished through, the fresh air welcomed. It made Ella's body shiver, but my skin felt hot, tight, too stretched. The wait was agonizing, not knowing what comes next was excruciating.

I gently shifted Ella's body and covered her with the flimsy, dirty blanket. It would seem it was all we were good for. In two quick strides, I was at the window and the vast horizon stretched. And that's when I saw it. The familiar scene. *Grandfather Astor's tower.*

That's where we were! I hadn't been back here since my parents were killed, but I'd recognize it anywhere. How did we end up here of all places? The cries of women traveled up the house, and I hated the fact that my grandfather's home had been turned into something so vile. But it could play in our favor. I knew this house inside out and every single inch of the ten acre beach property.

The secret passage. It was our ticket out. If we can get out of this room, I could get Ella and me to the secret passage and we'd run.

My heart thundered in hope and excitement. I debated whether I should wake up Ella and tell her about it but then decided against it. Just in case the walls had ears.

As if on cue, the door of our prison cracked open.

"Welcome, my lovely ladies." A man with pitch black hair and dark, soulless eyes entered the room along with a woman and three guards. I glared at all of them as I quickly strode to Ella and sheltered her with my body.

"Fuck you," I spat at him. "This is the shittiest welcome I have ever seen." He chuckled like I just gave him a compliment. "And who in the hell are you?"

I had a suspicion but needed to be sure.

"I'm Benito King, my darling," he beamed with pride. "And you, my little bird, have been causing some serious trouble."

“I’d say I’m sorry,” I muttered. “But my parents taught me not to lie.”

He grinned with malice. “Oh yes, my son Marco will have so much fun breaking you. There is fire in you that even makes my cock hard.”

Terror shot through my veins, but I made sure it didn’t show. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“I’m surprised at your age you can even get your cock hard,” I taunted. It was stupid, but it was my only weapon at this moment.

His cheeks colored red in ugly blotches. *Good, I pissed him off.*

The next instant, however, my cheek exploded in pain, as the guard’s hand struck across my face, hard. I staggered backwards, the back of my knees hitting the bed, and I fell next to Ella. She instantly jolted up and wrapped her hands around me. My cheek burned from the impact, and I felt like my entire face was in flames. My eyes stung, but I refused to let any tears fall, not for this motherfucker, not for his despicable son.

“I see we’ll have to teach you some manners,” Benito murmured, his eyes gawking over my almost naked body. I have never been so glad to have opted for full briefs underwear, instead of G-strings. My strapless bra was slightly lacking but it was better than nothing. “A word of advice, my little bird.” It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off; I wanted no advice from him. Instead, I held the words back. There was no sense in taunting him. We wouldn’t be able to run if they physically beat us, making our bodies too weak to move. And I had no doubt these men were not beyond that. “You are slightly damaged goods now. Both you and your friend here.” I sensed Ella’s distress without sparing her a glance. “Behave, and maybe you’ll get at least some pleasure from this whole ordeal.”

My body shivered in disgust. Ella stood behind me, her whole posture rigid. She was scared, and so was I, but both of us kept our composure. We had years of practice.

“What do you want?” I asked him angrily.

“Tonight, we are hosting a party.” He chuckled although I failed to see the humor. “Auction, really but it is a marvelous party for my men.” I wanted to spit into his evil face. “You two will be ushered to bathe,” he wrinkled his nose as if disgusted at our state of appearance, “to prepare you for the auction that starts in three hours. Make yourself presentable. Clothes will be brought in for you and your friend. ”

“What’s the point of making us presentable?” I questioned. “If you are only going to humiliate us.”

“Because if Marco is unwilling to marry you, you will become his whore to do as he pleases.” He smirked, a menacing smile on his face. “It is in your best interest to look your best so that he will marry you.”

“W-what? But I’m already married.”

“We have a way to fix that.”

I swallowed hard. What did that mean? I was scared to ask but I did it anyway.

“How?” My voice was breathless, every inch of my insides shaking with fear for Luciano.

“Divorce, my little bird. Well, more like annulment,” he drawled. “After all, I heard you and your husband are on your way to annul your little fling anyhow. Or we’ll just kill him.”

Annulment it is, I thought with my heart wrenching. I needed my husband alive to care and protect Matteo.

Without another word he turned around and left us with the woman and guards. The heavy silence enveloped the room, the meaning of his words a conviction that was written in my stars the moment I was born.

“Oh my God,” Ella whimpered under her breath, but the room was so eerily quiet the guards and woman could clearly hear it.

“It will be okay,” I told her. I was surprised my voice sounded stronger than I actually felt. The chances of escaping were slim, but I refused to lose hope. We wouldn’t stop fighting. Benito King had something coming to him if he thought we would just sit down and take whatever this fucked up world wanted to dish our way.

The woman that has been tasked with getting us prepared for the event watched us with pity. But there would be no help coming from her. From each breath she took, every movement and look, I could see she was a broken woman. She had probably endured a lifetime of abuse and wouldn’t risk getting more. Not on the account of Ella and I, not that I could blame her.

“Take them into the bathroom. They will need to bathe,” she ordered the men, and for the next few seconds, Ella and I stood watching guards as they came in and surrounded us, like we were hardcore criminals and a real threat. I watched them wearily, hoping they wouldn’t be the ones standing guard while we bathed.

“Just stay close to me,” I murmured under my breath, so only she could hear me. “You and I will probably be the last two to be put up for sale.” It

was only speculation but my gut feeling was telling me that since we escaped and managed to slip through their fingers, they'd keep us for last. Either damaged goods or highlights of the show.

They walked us down the hallway and into the large bathroom where two large porcelain tubs, full of steaming water, waited for us. Both Ella and I stood frozen as we watched men walk in and out of the bathroom till there were only two left.

"Okay, you two ladies get in the bath" the woman instructed. I glanced behind me, glad to see her with us. She was less of a threat than these men. "And please don't try anything. Otherwise, Julio here," she pointed to the guard, "will make things really uncomfortable for you. And there are three other guards outside the door."

There was no doubt that it wasn't an empty threat.

"Can we keep our undergarments on while bathing?" I hated that we even had to ask, my pride rebelling at the idea of anyone having any kind of control over what I should or shouldn't do.

The woman nodded but no sooner I felt the relief, the guardian interjected. "No! Boss wants them cleaned in detail, their pussy and all."

"We are not cars," I protested angrily. What kind of bullshit was this?

"Either you take it off and get in or I put you in myself," he threatened and I was sure he meant it.

"Well, can you turn around? Or get the fuck out so we can do it in the privacy!" I retorted with a false bravado. "This isn't a strip club."

He growled and took a threatening step forward. Ella and I took one backwards.

"Enough!" The older woman intervened. "Julio, you turn around and send your other boy to keep watch outside the door. Benito won't be happy if they are late."

A shadow of fear crossed his face and that was more telling than anything else. They were all scared of the man. Following her demand, I waited for his fellow guard to leave and Julian to turn around.

Then sharing a look with Ella, we both stripped our undergarments, swung our legs tentatively over the tub edge and then lowered ourselves into the tub. I could also imagine two of us were having a spa day, if there only weren't guards around us.

The door creaked open again and my head snapped in its direction. A young woman with midnight hair entered. She didn't meet our gazes, her

own eyes trained onto the floor. The bruise coloring her left cheek didn't escape me.

"Wash their hair," the elder woman instructed. "Start with the blonde one."

"We can do it on our own," I murmured but both women ignored me.

The young woman went straight to helping Ella duck and then lathering her hair with a scented shampoo. The conditioner followed. Her motions were efficient but gentle. It told me she did this many times. I wondered who she was. Whose debt was she paying? It hurt my heart to imagine what kind of horror she must have endured in this world to be stuck here.

After she was done with Ella, she efficiently moved to me and repeated the process. My eyes stung and burned. I wanted to stretch this moment forever but things were being done too efficiently. While the young woman washed my hair, I watched Ella being pulled out of the tub, patted dried and then dressed up. Like she was some kind of doll, to be put up for sale.

*We **are** being put up for sale*, I thought wryly.

Ella's honey colored eyes were locked to mine, as if she drew strength from me. Or maybe I was drawing strength from her. I wasn't quite sure.

The older woman handed her dry undergarments, while Ella gripped the towel tighter, keeping her body covered up. I caught the guard leering at her, enjoying the peep show and fury rose inside me. Wasn't it enough we had to endure mobsters, now we had to put up with idiots like that?

"Can't he turn around and offer us some privacy?" I asked in an exasperated tone. The old woman must hold some status because she nodded his way, and without a word, he turned back around and faced the door.

Ella quickly stripped down her wet towel and pulled on new undergarments. I stood up from the tub and in quick movements dried out with the help of the young woman and did the same. The moment dried undergarments were on, I quickly wrapped another dry towel around me waiting for Ella to be done.

And good thing, because no sooner had I secured it around me, the guard turned around. Asshole was hoping for a free show.

A maroon ball gown cascaded down Ella's body, accenting all her curves. She looked beautiful, her blonde hair and golden tone skin from our time in Italy, accented by the red colors.

“Red is reserved for courtesans.” The guard’s gleeful voice had my heart instantly sinking. I wasn’t sure if looking beautiful was the best thing right now. “Unless someone buys you for their own pleasure.”

“But she is not married,” I objected without even thinking. Not sure why I bothered. It wasn’t as if this damn event even made sense.

“She is not a virgin.” Jesus, neither was I. This was the twenty-first century. Someone should really educate these assholes on feminism. “Damaged goods,” he added.

He gave me a look that told me he considered both of us damaged goods. What. An. Asshole.

I’d love to punch him in the face. Not kill him, but freaking punch him and make him bleed. Maybe also kick his balls.

Turning my back to him, I looked at Ella. She was pale and shivering from fear, her eyes wide on the guard, all the while both women worked on her hair and makeup.

“Don’t listen to him,” I whispered, tugging her towards me. “It’s going to be okay.” I took her face between my hands and forced her to look at me. I portrayed calmness but it was thin ice, just a front that could easily crumble at any moment. One blast of heat and it’d be gone. But she needed it. I needed the illusion of it.

No amount of years could have ever prepared us for this. We knew the deal for years, since our first year of high school to be exact. In my case, this price was on my head before I was even born. But they were mistaken if they thought I’d take it lying down. I would fight them every single step of the way.

“Miss Romano, it is your turn.” The dressmaker lifted another gown and my heart stopped.

“I want a red gown. I’m damaged goods too,” I breathed out.

I would rather wear red than this. The silver elaborate gown was my mother’s. She wore it at her engagement party to my dad. The lavishly embroidered design from waist down made the gown unique. It was one of a kind. I still remembered the painting that hung in our family room. My mother and father looked like a fairytale couple at their engagement. I always begged her to let me wear it, and she promised that one day I would. For my own engagement party.

“I was instructed to have you wear this.”

“No,” I whispered. “Please, no.”

“Either you put it on, or I put it on you,” the guard chimed in, his tone threatening and cruel. There was no doubt he’d deliver the threat and enjoy it too.

I itched to get my hands on a weapon and just kill him. I was never a violent person, but I was quickly becoming one. I wanted to draw blood, make them pay for touching my mother’s stuff, for putting their filthy, blood infested hands on them. And on us.

“Please turn back around so I can get dressed in privacy.”

He glared at me, his black eyes full of detest and hate. “You think you are better than the rest of us. But soon you will find out.”

At least he did turn his back to me.

With the lead in the pit of my stomach and my heart squeezing in my chest, I dropped the towel onto the floor and stepped into the beautiful silver gown. I felt my bottom lip quiver, and I bit into it. Instead, I focused on Ella.

We can do this. We’ll survive this.

As if she knew what I was thinking, she nodded. Both ladies pulled up the elaborate gown up my body and one of them started buttoning the platinum buttons up my back. Never in a million years did I think I’d wear my mother’s dress to be sold off. Like some whore. To be property of a mobster.

“Bellissima.” The word uttered by the old woman was spoken softly but it hit wrong. I didn’t want to look beautiful. Not for these cruel men. Not for this cruel underworld.

She spoke something to the guard but words didn’t register. I just focused on Ella, my mind working through different scenarios on our escape plan. We just needed a short window, and we could take the secret path. Run and never look back.

Two guards came back with a large, heavy full size mirror. They placed it in front of me and suddenly the reflection stared back at me. My mother’s reflection. The bodice of the silver gown hugged my bust, the staples elaborate dress accenting my breasts and pale, slim neckline. The dress shimmered on me, even the poor lighting in this room couldn’t take away its sparkle. With her expert hands, the old woman pulled my hair into a loose bun with curly strands framing my face. No make up for me.

“Please bring the tiara from Mr. Romano. It has been in our safe for the past four years.” They really thought of everything. What a cruel, twisted

mind my family has!

A short minute and my mother’s platinum tiara sparkling with diamonds rested on my head, like a heavy crown. I’d give it to these people. They managed to transform me into an innocent, fragile looking temptress.

For the Romano belle to fetch the highest price, I thought bitterly.

But I was neither innocent nor fragile. Not anymore!

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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LUCIANO

Death comes for us all.

I've watched hundreds of men die. Some I have killed, others were killed by my enemies. Some I remembered, others I didn't. Some deserved it, others maybe not. But this one did, many times over.

Alphonso Romano's body laid at my feet, full of lead. Full of bullets. Some from my gun. Some from Massimo's. And some from Alexei's.

"You good?" Alexei's Russian accent was thick. Needless to say, this man wasn't his favorite. He tried to get his dirty paws on his half-sister.

Cassio and Luca still fought Alphonso's guards and as the shots of bullets flew through the air, the fear dug its claws into my heart. For the first time, I tasted fear of death.

Fear for her.

My wife.

Grace Vitale.

It was an unfamiliar feeling but the pain was razor blade sharp. If Grace died, the death would claim me too. Because she had taken a big piece of me.

I raised my gaze off the dead body of the last Romano male and watched Cassio aim a gun execution style at the last standing guard.

I continued down the maze, my footsteps rushed and silent as I waved our way through it.

Keep Grace safe. Keep Grace safe.

The gunshots sounded off, too near, another scream. A woman's.

“That’s Ella,” Massimo’s voice portrayed the terror I felt. Why didn’t I hear Grace’s voice?

My boots hit the ground running, our movements silent and deadly. I couldn’t run fast enough.

I’ll kill anyone who touches her. I’ll burn this world to the ground if anyone hurts her.

With my hand on the gun and my finger wrapped tightly around the trigger, I ran ahead. My wife’s name echoed in my brain with every step, with every heartbeat. As soon as we got to a clearing, my step faltered.

Sophia Romano’s body lying motionless on the dirt ground, her blood tainting the earth. Two other dead bodies spread across the small clearing.

And that’s when I saw it. My wife’s nude pump shoe. The crushing of my chest felt like a physical punch as Massimo let out a raggedy breath.

“What the fuck happened here?” Alexei and Cassio asked at the same time.

The gurgling sound came from Sophia’s mouth. Taking the two strides to her body, I bent down on my haunches.

“Where is my wife?” I watched the woman gurgle her own blood, choking on it. *Let her choke on it, after I get my answers.*

Her fingers reached out to me and gripped my shirt.

“Help me.”

She was fucking nuts if she thought I’d ever help her. All the pain she caused my family. And now she took my wife. Threatened my son.

But I kept my emotions in check. I needed answers.

“Where is my wife?” I repeated. “If you give me a good answer, I might spare you.”

Glancing down, I watched her desperation and the will to live move her thin lips. I never said I’d let her live, but I’d spare her choking on her own blood.

Her lips moved, her voice faint as she tried to give me the answer. I dropped down onto the dirt, my knees digging into it, my face leaning close to hers, I could smell blood on her breath.

“Where is my woman?” I snarled, shaking her. “Where is she?”

“Luciano.” Cassio kneeled down beside me, his hand on my shoulder. I turned to meet his gaze and found him holding out a needle.

The rawness… it shattered through me dragging me under, drowning me. The drawing inside my chest spreads, clawing the hole deep and

burying itself into its darkness. Grace was my light.

Grace is my light. I need her.

Our son needs her.

Nonno needs her.

We need her.

"You fucking bitch," I hissed. "Where is my wife? Or I swear to God, I'll keep you alive so I can torture you over and over again for the rest of your miserable life."

"She shot me." Her voice was barely audible.

My Grace. My sweet wife. She shot her grandmother.

"I bet you deserved it, *vedma*," Alexei spat out, his towering frame nudging her legs, kicking them around like the piece of trash she was. He looked like a fucking psychopath, or an angel of death, towering over her like that. He called her a *witch*, which she truly was.

"Where is my wife, you bitch?" I shouted into her face. She and Alphonso cost my mother's and sister's lives. I wouldn't allow her to take my wife from me too. The mother of my son. "What happened to her?"

"Benito," she rasped faintly. "Astor beach house."

Steeling my jaw, I lifted my arm and aimed my gun at her head. "Rot in hell," I told her coolly and pulled the trigger. Her body slumped into the dirt. "Quick death was more than you deserved."

I slid my Glock back in its holster and turned to face the men.

"Connecticut," I told the group. "That's where they took her. Grace and Ella are in Connecticut."

Hold on Grace, I'm coming.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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GRACE

My head throbbed with pain, but I ignored it. I couldn't afford to show any weakness. These people would exploit it.

Ella and I kept close to each other, her hand in mine. I refused to have us separated. No matter what. After we were adequately prepared for the auction, like we were some kind of animals, five guards surrounded us and ushered us back into the hallway. My heart thundered, recognizing every inch of it. But with five of them surrounding us, there was no room for escape. Even so, I refused to give up.

The hallway here was dark. Ella's and my heels clicked against the stone floor. My heartbeat was frantic, and I didn't have to ask my best friend to know hers was too. I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

Think about Matteo. Focus on opportunities to escape. Think about Matteo.

The hallway ended and large stairs led to the floor below.

"No matter what," I uttered in a hushed voice, "don't let go of my hand."

With a jerky nod, we slowly descended the stairs, our fingers intertwined. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Our heels echoed through my grandpa Astor's beach mansion. And that's when I saw them. Waiting for us like some sacrificial lambs.

Benito King. Marco King.

Both men made of the same cloth. Cruelty was their middle name. They relished in it. The word was that both father and son had a thing for redheads. *I should have left my hair brown.*

Then a loud whistle travelled through the large foyer, and I realized there were about fifteen men there waiting for us.

How did Grandpa's estate become this?

My eyes locked on the most dangerous man in the room, I ignored the rest of the crowd. I clenched my jaw tight, hearing some cruel words thrown our way.

The runaway bellas.

Whore bellas.

Vitale's whore wife.

Ella's whimpering registered through the ringing in my ears.

"Be strong," I whispered, barely moving my lips. "Stay with me."

All the while, my eyes remained on the two cruelest King members. The gleam in Benito King's eyes didn't bode well for me. The closer we got, the rowdier the crowd.

"Damn, for that piece of ass, I'm willing to forget she's Vitale's bitch."

But I'm not. I'll always be his.

The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them back. I had to keep a lid on my temper. Observe and wait. That was the only plan I had. If all failed, I'd run from them in plain sight. Let them shoot me. It was better to die than be subjected to their abuse.

Once at the bottom stair, the guards barked the order for us to stop.

Benito King strode over, his steps leisured. Like Ella and I were here of our own free will.

"Miss Romano," he greeted me, ignoring Ella completely. His choice of greeting didn't escape me. He still wanted goods, damaged or not. *Fuck!*

The urge to close my eyes was strong, but I fought it.

Show no weakness. Show no fear.

But the fact of the matter, I was scared shitless. It took all I got not to start shaking and whimpering like Ella. That's when I saw him. Roberto standing behind Marco King. That fucking bastard!

Ella saw him at the same time because a shocked gasp escaped her. When we ran, I told her I thought it was him, but I had no proof and I hadn't seen him since we got back. Apparently, he was still around.

I'll add him to my 'to kill' list, I thought wryly.

Benito noticed my glare at Roberto and chuckled. "I see you met your cousin," he gleamed. My eyes snapped to the old devil in confusion. His laughter filled the room. "Roberto Romano is your cousin." My jaw

dropped onto the ground. That one I would have never guessed. “He’s Alphonso’s son.”

Ella and I shared a desperate look. Roberto Romano would continue the Romano legacy. We didn’t kill them all. Would he go after Matteo?

Benito’s eyes returned to me and roamed over my body with appreciation and cruelty.

“You clean up nice, Miss Romano. You will indeed make a lovely bride. A queen fit for the king.” My eyes darted to his son who was right behind him. These two were crazy. Marco was no king, and I would never be his queen. “What do you think, son?”

“Redhead beauty and enormous fortune. What is there to say no to?” Marco chuckled like he just said the funniest joke. Except nobody but him was laughing.

Fucking idiot, if he thought he’d ever get his dirty fingers on my fortune. It was long gone. He must have thought me an airhead, stupid little girl. Let them think that though. And when they least expect it, I would strike.

Benito King wrapped his disgusting hand around my waist and turned around to stare at the crowd. Thank God he was on my right side, so I still kept Ella on my left.

“It is unfortunate that Alphonso Romano lost his life. As you all know, the beginning price for Miss Romano was set at a million dollars.”

I gasped at the stupid amount of money. These men were idiots.

Please don’t bid.

Maybe if nobody bid on us, we could escape the clutches of these two lunatics. My heart immediately sank as a hand went up. Then another. And another.

Two million. Three million. Four million

Benito King chuckled. “I knew you’d be the hit.”

“Ten million,” someone shouted.

Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

Then it finally stopped.

“You have superseded the price of the last four auctions combined,” Marco bragged. “You were worth the wait.”

Ella and I shared a glance. I could sense desperation rising in her, just as I could feel my own.

“Fifteen million,” Benito announced. “I have decided to make Miss Romano my bride.”

“What?” Marco hissed low, so nobody else could hear him. It didn’t matter though, because his fury was written all over his face.

“I thought you were married already,” the words escaped me.

“I have a mistress, but she won’t interfere.” He chuckled like he just said the most entertaining joke. “Your husband and son, on the other hand. We will have to take care of that.” Then he chuckled, displaying his yellow teeth. “Roberto will take care of that, won’t you?”

I kept my face stoic. I couldn’t show any emotions to these people. I knew men like Benito. They relished in destroying what people loved. Just like my grandmother. Just like my uncle.

I have to kill Roberto. It finally made sense why I saw Roberto in my mom’s dressing room backstage alongside my uncle.

My lips pressed tightly together, I held his gaze. He wanted to see me react. Well, he had another thing coming. I wished he’d hold his breath waiting for my reaction. My back stiff, I refused to even blink.

He finally looked away, bored expression on his face as his eyes shifted to Ella.

“Now what to do with your friend,” he pondered although the damn bastard already knew. He kept waiting, hoping I’d say something. I squeezed Ella’s hand, biting my tongue.

Do. Not. Show. Any. Emotion.

Just like my grandmother, he would destroy what I loved and cared about.

“She can be mine and my son’s courtesan.” The greedy bastard thought he won. “What do you say, Marco?”

“What the fuck ever,” he muttered. “How about Grace Romano to be my courtesan? She was supposed to be my bride.”

But Daddy got greedy. The pathetic loser should learn to go get himself a girlfriend the old fashioned way. And his father should be executed. On second thought, every single man in this room should be executed.

Theatrically, Benito King addressed the crowd bowing down. “And this concludes Belles for the evening.” Disappointing grunts echoed through my grandfather's home.

“This is bullshit, Benito!” One of the mobsters complained. “You had us come in the dead of the night just to witness you getting the Romano bride.”

“You bid thirteen million, right?” Marco interjected.

“I did.” The man puffed his chest when in fact he should probably hide somewhere for being so stupid to offer such a ridicules amount of money for a woman.

These men were pathetic, every single one of them.

“Well, considering my father’s short attention span,” Marco continued, “you can have her next. For half that price.”

The room broke out into laughter at my expense.

“How about a quarter of that price?” he negotiated. “After Benito is done with her, she’ll be broken. I just want to dip into Romano pussy before my life is over. Obviously, there won’t be another one in my lifetime.”

Another rowdy laughter.

The blind rage shot through me, and before I knew what I was doing, I found myself next to the man and slapped him hard across the face. The smack vibrated through the room and not a single peep sounded. Or maybe I couldn’t hear it because blood pumped through my veins like a damn rafting river.

The mobster’s hand snaked around my neck, clutching, blocking my airway while I struggled for oxygen. My hands clawed at his hand but he was too strong.

“Enough!” Benito’s voice vibrated through the room like a cannon. “Do not damage my property.”

The mobster’s hands instantly let go and I gasped for air. *Kill them.* It was the only thought that echoed. *Kill them all.*

“Guard, escort the two women back to their room,” Benito’s voice penetrated my brain. “The other is damaged goods. She can be part of one of my brothels.”

Over my dead body, Benito King. The fury was an ugly beast inside me, but I let it ignite, let it spread.

With Ella’s hand clenched in mine, we climbed the stairs, one heavy step after another. The beautiful gowns we wore hid the ugliness of the situation. It fit the mobster world though. They hid their ugliness with flash and glamor but underneath it all, these men were rotten.

I glanced behind me and noted only one guard accompanied us. My neck hurt from the earlier encounter, but I ignored it. It wasn’t time to be feeling pain. This could be our chance at escape. We had to take it. It might be our only chance.

I glanced at Ella and mouthed silently. “Follow my lead.”

We kept walking, a few more steps and we’d be at the top. I knew our room, our cell, was on the left, but I feigned confusion and took a right. The guard’s hand wrapped around my wrist.

“This way.”

And I let my body instinctively apply the years of self-defense classes. I twisted my body inward and gripped my hands on his forearms with all the strength I could muster.

To stay alive. To see my son. To see my husband.

The sound of the bone snapping rose bile in my throat, but I ignored it. His wail sounded off, and I knew there were more guards after us. I kicked him in the balls and shoved him down the marble steps, sending him off tumbling.

I didn’t stay to watch him fall. I grabbed Ella’s hand and headed for the secret passage.

“Run, run,” I muttered to myself.

“Where?” I ignored her question as we came to the end of the hallway, faced by the stone wall. “It is a dead end.”

My hands frantically palmed the rough surface of the old tower, looking for the ledge.

“C’mon,” I muttered. “Please, c’mon.”

The rough stone cut into my soft palm, but I ignored it. That pain was nothing compared to what Benito King would have in store for us. We had to run.

“Here it is,” I whispered victoriously. I pulled the ledge and the wall shifted.

“What the-”

I quickly pulled her inside the wooden landing, and pressed the ledge on the inside and watched the wall shift back to its place.

“How did you know about this?” Ella questioned in a hushed tone.

“This was my Grandfather Astor’s place,” I whispered my response. “Be careful down the stairs.”

I kicked off my heels, and Ella did the same. In silence, we took the ladder, spiral staircase, lowering ourselves one at a time. The second we were both on the ground floor, I took her hand, and we squeezed through the small wooden door which led us onto the sandy path.

The cool, ocean air hit my face, the smell of the salt tingling my nostrils.

Freedom. It had never tasted so good. And Ella and I had been caged birds quite a few times. Sharing a glance, we both lifted our long gowns and started running.

The cool air burned my lungs, the sensation welcomed. The moon was full, lighting out way down the beach. With heavy footsteps, we kicked the sand with each stride.

Run. Don't stop. Run.

Our breathing quickly got labored, our heartbeat raced in fear and exercise. The crashing of the waves mixed with distant voices. But it was hard to tell… were they just innocent passersby or enemies hunting us.

I risked a glance over my shoulders.

"Fuck," I muttered. Roberto was on our tail, along with the guard that gawked at us in the room while we were getting changed. More men ran behind them, the whole mobster squad eager to get their hands on their prize.

Ella glanced behind too and her step tripped over the gowns, having her falling down onto her knees, sand burrowing her kneecaps.

I quickly pulled her up, both of us losing precious time.

"Run, Ella."

My gown was too heavy. I should have kicked it off me before we stepped onto the sand. It was too late. We just had to keep our pace for another two miles.

We can do this.

My breathing labored, but the adrenaline kept me going. Ella wheezed, struggling to catch her breath. I kept pulling her along.

"We are almost there," I breathed hard. "Keep running."

She wasn't accustomed to running. I didn't particularly enjoy it either, but I had never been so glad that I made myself jog for the past twelve months.

Sweat trickled down my back, and no amount of cool breeze from the ocean could soothe this heat. My grip loosened and my long gown dragged on the sand. Before I could fist it and raise it above my ankles, I stepped on the hem of the dress and in slow motion watched as the world tumbled in front of my eyes.

"Don't stop, Ella," I yelled. "Run."

“No.”

“Run,” I screamed. “Go get help.” I scrambled to get on my feet, painfully aware of Roberto gaining the distance. “Run, Ella.”

A sob escaped her. “I’ll get help, I promise.”

She kicked her feet into a fast pace and resumed running.

“This dress,” I muttered, struggling with its weight, lifting it up and starting running. Roberto was almost at my back, the awareness tingling on my neck. And not the good kind.

Please, God. Don’t let them get me.

No sooner had the thought left me, I felt man’s hand grab my dress and pull me back. The sudden motion had me losing my balance and falling flat onto my back. The impact took my breath away, causing stars to swirl in my vision.

“Fucking bitch,” he muttered breathlessly, his knee pressing on my chest.

I couldn’t breathe, the heavy weight of him pressing down onto my chest.

“Let go of me,” I screamed, thrashing under his weight. His fist connected with my face, causing stars and pain to burst behind my eyelids.

“Such a little princess,” he growled, his knees forcing my legs apart. “You think you are so much better.”

His hand grabbed my pussy through my dress and sheer terror shot through me. “What are you doing? You are my cousin.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he hissed on a growl, his face twisted with rage.

“Don’t touch me,” I yelped, my voice rasped from shrieks, burning my throat. “Stop!”

I screamed and cried, shaking my head. He leaned over, his strong frame keeping me in place, as his knees nudged my legs further apart, shoving his hand up my dress.

“I’m going to have so much fun fucking you,” he said, licking my ear.

“We are related by blood,” I cried. What was wrong with this guy? “Others are coming.”

I attempted to use any excuse to get him to stop.

His evil, ugly laugh echoed through my ears. “I sent them all in the opposite direction. I’ll fuck every hole, just like the *puttana* that you are.”

I spit into his face. He slapped my other cheek, ringing in my ears, making it hard to focus. His big hand grabbed my pussy, yanking on my

panties.

Roberto Romano is crazy. A sick psychopath. How could he even contemplate this? It was a whole different type of twisted, it made bile rise in my throat.

Tears burned in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. Not for this miserable loser. Disgust was thick in my stomach and despite pain throbbing through every single inch of my body, I kept fighting him.

Warm sticky liquid trickled down my nose. *Blood*, I realized. The sound of my shredding panties cut through the night, and I cried out. Then I shrieked at the top of my lungs as tears poured down my face. I lost the battle.

While holding me in place, my back down against the sand, he used his other hand to unbuckle himself and freed his cock.

“Nooooo,” I screamed. “Noooo!”

“Stay still, bitch,” he growled, “Or I’ll fuck your ass raw.”

I kept kicking, hard and relentless. I didn’t care if I came out of it black and blue. I scratched and bit, screamed and thrashed.

Just as I thought I had lost, his whole body lifted off me. I blinked my eyes, watching him dangle up in the air in confusion.

“You are dead!” My husband’s voice was a dark promise, a menacing growl.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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LUCIANO

It took us two fucking hours to get out of the damn city. I checked on my father and son, they were safe.

"Bring her home, son." My father loved Grace as his own daughter. We have been family all along, but I was too blinded by rage to see it. Now I knew and I wanted to make it all better, enjoy the rest of my life with her. Have more babies, see Matteo grow up to be a good man. And he would, because he had his mother in him.

"I'll bring her home, Pa," I promised. "Stay safe and inside with your grandson." It still felt surreal. "Lorenzo will keep the compound safe. As soon as I have her, I'll bring her home. She'll want to see our son safe and happy."

And I'd make her happy. Like I was supposed to be making her happy from the moment we met.

Once we got to the old Astor beach house, I waited for our men to gather. It took another two hours for everything to be put in place. We surveyed the house, found the best angle for the attack and armed up to our teeth. We didn't know how many men were inside, we were going in blind.

From the outside, there were no signs of life, but I had no doubt they were all there. How in the fuck did her beach house from the Astor side of her family become an auctioning place was beyond me! It didn't matter, because it ended right here and right now. Tonight!

Heading towards the house, using the shadows of the night as our disguise, I spotted a figure of a woman stumbling, running through the sand.

I realized who it was the same moment Massimo shouted. “Ella!”

All of us picked up the pace, running towards her form. My eyes scanned the area. Where was Grace? Where was my wife? Those two always stuck together.

She threw herself into Massimo’s arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

“G-Grace,” she tried to get her words out, her tear stained face causing dread in my stomach. *Where is my wife?* “Help her. Roberto has her.”

“Where is she?” I demanded. She immediately turned around and started running in the same direction. Without another word, we followed.

And that’s when I saw her, laid out onto the ground, fighting that fucking bastard. Roberto had his hands on my wife. Rage shot through me, giving me added adrenaline and fury.

We arrived not a moment too soon.

The terror of my wife’s screams chilled me to the bones. The rage shot through my brain and seeing her small form kick and thrash down the beach, Roberto’s fist connecting with her face. My feet kicked harder, ran faster. My hand was raised, the gun pointed at Roberto, but I couldn’t pull the trigger. Grace fought him and the thought of shooting her by accident terrified me.

Fear is part of us, I heard my father’s voice. *It means we have something valuable.*

I roared in rage, seeing Roberto unbuckle his pants, trying to rape my wife. Only the blind fury and love for my woman pushed me forward. Before he could thrust inside her, I grabbed him by his neck and lifted him off her small body.

“You are dead!” I shouted a promise, dangling him up in the air.

Grace scurried backwards, her knees coming up to her chest, covering herself up. My eyes locked with her violet gaze, taking her state in. A purple bruise forming on her eye, her cheek colored black and blue, blood running down her nose.

“Did he rape you?” I rasped, my chest squeezing in pain seeing her small body shake.

“N-no,” she stuttered, tears streaming down her face.

“Here, take my jacket.” Cassio offered. She shook her head, scooting away from him.

She sobbed, and my fucking chest hurt. It physically hurt to see my strong woman like this. Cassio remained at a distance, but extended his

jacket to her again. Her hands shook as she took it.

I turned my furious gaze at Roberto. “She is your fucking cousin,” I growled.

“Still a piece of ass,” he spat. My fist connected with his face and a cowardly yelp escaped him.

“Kill him, Luciano,” she muttered, her gaze locked with mine. “And make it hurt.”

I looked at Alexei and Luca, “Go see if you can find any of those bastards left.” My voice was hoarse, shaking from the rage. “And kill them all, any of them.”

The two took off, ready to start the massacre of those bastards.

My eyes shifted back to Roberto and dropped him down, letting him fall down onto his knees like a dog he was. My fist connected with his face, over and over again, till my knuckles were raw.

“I’ll kill you slowly,” I promised darkly, holding his stare. There was so much adrenaline pumping through my veins, I could dish out punches all night. “I’ll cut you into the tiniest of pieces and scatter you all over this bloody planet. A saint won’t be able to put you together.”

I drove my knee into his stomach, pulling out my knife. He bowled over with the impact into his gut and it gave me a perfect angle to grab his hair and shove his face into the sand. I pressed it hard against the granular material. Hearing him choke on it as he struggled unsuccessfully against me had me grinning with satisfaction.

“Nobody touches my woman,” I hissed, cutting his cheek open. “Nobody touches my family.”

Blood gushed out of it, smearing all over his face, mixing with sand grains. His arms flailed, reaching for anything to grab ahold of but there was nothing. Only sand grains.

“You fucked up,” I growled, my murderous rage blinding me. I shoved my knife into his neck, where his main artery kept him alive and watched him gurgle, choking on his blood and I never delighted more in the sound of a man dying.

“My. Woman.” I let go of his body, and he collapsed sideways into the sand, the blood soaking into it.

“Luciano.” My wife’s soft voice snapped me out of my rage, and I turned to find her watching me.

Fuck, I kept showing my ruthless side to my wife. It wasn't exactly a way to get her to stay with me.

I had to take care of her first. She didn't need to see all my cruelty and ruthlessness. At least not now. But with our gazes locked, instead of fear, her eyes glimmered with something else. She raised her hand, reaching out for me, and I rushed to her side, wrapping my arms around her.

And then sobs won out and her small body shook as she buried her face into my chest.

"It's okay, Tesoro," I murmured. "I'm here. I'll always be here."

My hand clumsily rubbed her back, staining her dress with blood. They killed for her. But right now, nothing mattered more than making her feel better. I'd clean her up later. I'd give her anything and everything she needed. Right now, I'd comfort her.

I raised my head and met Cassio's eyes. He shook his head. Benito and Marco King were still on the loose. His eyes traveled to my wife's shaking form, worry edged on his face. He was familiar with the gut wrenching pain of watching your woman almost getting raped.

My gaze shifted to Luca and Alexei. Massimo already took Ella back to the car. She was barely holding herself together. I couldn't fault him for taking care of his woman.

"Thank you," I told them all.

All three of them nodded in silence, watching my brave, strong wife fall apart in my arms.

"Shhhh," I murmured. "I got you."

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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GRACE

My whole body jolted out of bed, my breathing labored. I struggled to catch my breath, my eyes darting around looking for anyone lurking in the dark.

"Shhh. It's okay; I'm here." Luciano's voice penetrated through the fog and his face came into focus. "You need to rest."

He watched me with love, his hands gently wrapped around me. *Am I dreaming?*

"Matteo?" I rasped out, my voice cracking. "Ella?"

"Ella is safe; she's with Massimo. Matteo's safe," he whispered. "I just checked on him. Our son is safe."

I blinked my eyes. *Our son.*

"Roberto is dead, so are his father and grandmother. Matteo is safe; so are you." He leaned forward and placed a kiss on my lips. "I love you, Grace Vitale."

I love you too. But words refused to leave my mouth. So much has happened since we first met. So many ugly words and memories. My chest felt tight, like someone pressed on it with weights.

As if he could read my thoughts, Luciano reached out and took my hand into his.

"Please, Luciano-"

He stopped me. "Please, Grace. Don't leave me."

My eyes flared, trying to understand what he was saying but my brain was too slow.

“I fucked up when I doubted you and put a gun to your head.” I flinched at the memory. “It was empty, but that doesn’t justify it.”

“Empty?” I whispered, my voice shaking.

“Yes, I emptied all the bullets. The gun was empty.” He lifted my hand to his mouth. “Grace Vitale, I love you. I loved you back then, and I love you now.”

“You do?” I rasped.

“I do,” he confirmed. “I was blind and furious, thinking you chose your uncle over me. I was blind, not seeing the real you, but I still loved you. I wanted all of you. There hasn’t been a woman for me since you left.”

I must have looked stunned because he continued.

“I swear on my mother’s and sister’s graves,” he croaked. “The gun was empty when I pulled the trigger, and I haven’t had another woman in my bed. I tried; I won’t lie. But all I could see and smell was you. It made me sick to be with any woman so I gave up and searched the world for you.”

The room went silent, his confession heavy in the air. I loved him too but fear held me back.

“The gun was empty?”

“Yes.” His forehead leaned against mine. “You are my life, Grace. I was an asshole. Your words, telling me you loved me, didn’t sink in till I sat in our bedroom that night, alone in the dark. But those words will forever be part of me, engraved in my heart and soul.”

I wanted another chance with him. Didn’t I? I wanted my happily ever after, my own fairy tale.

I stared up into his hazel eyes, that always pulled me in. The eyes that I lost myself again and again. The eyes of our son.

“There hasn’t been anyone else for me either,” I told him, my admission raw. It made me feel vulnerable. “I love you,” I whispered.

Our mouths connected and our kiss was desperate, his lips devouring me like I was his oxygen. Eventually, Luciano pulled back, both of us breathing heavily.

“My wife.” Yes, I was his wife. He was my everything. “My strong, brave wife.”

“I don’t know about that,” I muttered. “I was scared. Both Ella and I were.”

I thought back to the struggles as we roamed Europe, worries about Matteo, hiding from him and my family. Were they wasted years? For

naught?

“You are brave, and I don’t deserve you.” He took my face between his hands, his lips brushing against the tip of my nose. “But I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. You gave me a son, named him after my father, even after I fucked up majorly.”

“I loved you,” I told him simply. “And I still do. I didn’t betray you; I’ll never betray you. But I can understand your anger. My family cost you a lot.”

“But that wasn’t your debt to pay.”

I had to agree with him there. “Fresh start,” I murmured.

“Yes, fresh start,” he agreed.

“I have to tell you one more thing.” We might as well lay it all on the table. He waited, tense. “I have been laundering money. I won’t do it anymore, but you should probably know. Just in case some shit follows when I give my notice. Though to be honest, I kind of liked it.” I peered at him through my lashes. “I wouldn’t mind continuing it, as my little side hustle. Maybe we will become competitors.”

His booming laugh filled the room, and I wondered what was so funny.

“I know, my little Ghost. Because I’m the Ruthless King.”

My eyes widened at his admission. “What?”

“I just found out you were the Ghost a few days ago.” He pressed a feather light kiss against my mouth. “My little criminal.”

My lips curved into a smile against his. “I had the best teacher.”

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EPILOGUE

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Luciano - One Year Later

Our home backyard was draped in silence, as we listened to the priest's words, blessing our baby girl. Our little Francesca Aria Vitale, named after my mother and Grace's. Dark hair framed her little face, matching her big brother's and mine. But it was her eyes that had everyone falling all over themselves. She had her mother's beautiful eyes.

My wife. I'd never get sick and tired of saying those two words. She cradled our daughter in her arms, her small body leaning against mine. I studied my wife's rosy cheeks and ginger red hair strands flying with the light breeze.

This woman was my beginning, my middle, and my end. She was my whole life. This family, blood and non-blood, was what this life was about.

"You are staring at me," she whispered under her breath, so only I could hear it.

"You love when I watch you."

And her wide smile was my confirmation. I'd never tire of watching her soft smile and happiness on her beautiful face.

The christening ceremony for our new addition was perfect. Nonno and Matteo practically shone like lightbulbs. My father must have taken some kind of reverse aging cream because I swore he looked better and younger each day. He swore it was happiness and our family.

Vasili and his wife, along with their one-year-old son were here with us, as well as Alessio, Nico, Luca, Alexei, and Raphael.

The priest called for the godfather to step in. I was surprised when Grace suggested Cassio for the godfather, knowing her aversion to the King

family.

“He is your best friend,” she murmured. “Ella is my best friend. She is Matteo’s godparent. It is only fair, your best friend is Francesca’s.”

Needless to say, Cassio was shocked as well. There might have been a slight resemblance of a tear in his eyes. I wasn’t sure.

Grace gently handed our daughter to Cassio and smiled.

“Protect my baby,” she joked.

“With my life,” he vowed. And I knew he would.

As the priest recited the verses, my wife’s hand found mine and our fingers interlocked. Her eyes were on Francesca, watching her like a lioness. She protected the ones she loved with all her might, and it made me love her even more.

“May almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit bless you Francesca Aria Vitale.”

The cheer sounded off, and Grace’s proud smile breathed life into my chest. No matter what life had in store for us, she would always be my rock, my flame.

Francesca’s tiny body looked even smaller in Cassio’s arms. He looked like a big bear worried about hurting its cub. I couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight and laugh when my father snapped the picture of the two of them, and Cassio warned him he’d wake up the baby.

I nuzzled my face into my wife’s neck, inhaling deeply. Her scent always calmed me, grounded me.

“You know, husband,” she whispered, “we could sneak out for a little romp.”

My chest shook with the laugh I was trying to hold back. Though her words always managed to surprise me, I wasn’t going to bring attention to ourselves. I was all about rutting and romping my wife.

“I married an insatiable woman.” I gently nipped her earlobe.

“But you love it,” she murmured. “And I love you, Luciano Vitale.”

“I love you, mio Tesoro. From the moment I spotted you.”

“All the way then, huh?”

“Yes, my love.” This woman could single handedly bring me to my knees. “You are mine, Grace. You’ve been mine from the moment you took your first breath. And you’ll be mine when you take your last breath.”

For a preview to the Belles and Mobsters Series, Book Two, make sure to keep reading. Check out the prologue to Nico.

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PREVIEW OF BELLES & MOBSTERS: NICO

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One Year Ago

"William, are you mad?" I hissed under my breath. "Take that money and return it. Pronto." And in case he didn't understand the urgency in Italian, I added in English, "Right fucking now."

What the hell was he thinking to take a damn money bag from the mafia? It didn't matter whether they left the bag behind by accident or not. I couldn't comprehend how someone would *forget* a bag full of money. Lots of money! It must have been a test. One that my husband and John, our best friend, failed. Big time!

The Morrelli family was known for their ruthlessness. Everyone feared them, despite the fact they moved in high social circles and among some of the most prestigious politicians. The fact of the matter was they ruled D.C. and Maryland with an iron fist. Dominico Morrelli was known as the Wolf for Christ's sake. He ripped people's throats out for crossing him. If that wasn't something to be feared, I didn't know what was.

"I didn't steal it, Bianca," my husband protested. His blonde hair was disheveled and wet from the rain. He was lucky to dock his boat without crashing against the pier. There was a storm coming, a hurricane nearing the coastlines of the Maryland shores. It was one of the only downfalls of living in this area. That and how freaking expensive it was.

My eyes darted to John who looked just as soaked. Those two found a side gig to transport people back and forth across the bay. *Only once in a while*, they justified it.

Except, they weren't regular people. They were criminals. I ought to wring both of their necks. We were no match for the mafia.

“Don’t look at me like that, Bee.” John’s hands raised in surrender, his whole appearance just as disheveled as my husband’s. “Will is telling the truth. They left the bag behind. Finders, keepers.”

I wanted to smack both of them, for acting so childish.

“It doesn’t work like that with the mafia,” I argued in a hushed tone. The twins were sound asleep, and the last thing I needed right now was for them to wake up. It was a long day caring for them, along with the worry for my husband weighing me down. “They will kill us. All of us. You have to return the money!”

It was late May, and it constantly rained. Things were not looking up. Even this hurricane was a freak of nature. It wasn’t even a hurricane season yet.

The rain pounded against the windows, the force of the wind howling making this whole situation even darker. I loved our house, but right now, it spooked me. We were so exposed with the French windows surrounding us. I felt like we were being watched from the bay by the underworld of Baltimore, ready to attack us.

Yes, my imagination was getting the best of me. Because nobody smart would be out on the bay in this weather. Not unless they had a death wish.

“They left the bag full of money behind.” My husband was adamant about keeping the money. “It could be their way of paying for the service.”

“William, they paid you and John already,” I pointed out the obvious to him. “That bag was forgotten behind. You cannot keep it.” I turned to John, who I've known as long as William. “John, those men are brutal. They won’t just kill us; they’ll kill all our family. Everyone!”

He thought I was exaggerating, but all they had to do was read the articles in the papers and they’d realize how dangerous this was.

“If they call and bring it up, we’ll give it back,” John reasoned.

“What the hell were the two of you thinking? Getting involved with those people is a death sentence.”

“We need the money,” they both responded at the same time. “You know we need the money, babe.” My husband’s stubborn voice tried to make me see this whole situation his way. “They seem pretty decent, keeping to themselves and clean-cut suits. You should see Dominico Morrelli, he was in a very expensive suit. You’d never be able to tell he was a criminal.”

My heart shuddered with fear, and I exhaled shakily. Those two were in the same boat as Dominico Morrelli. They were lucky they came out of it alive. I couldn't completely grasp the reason why these criminals were using someone else's boat. It wasn't as if Dominico Morrelli couldn't afford a Grady White boat.

"Those guys don't seem so bad," John muttered, agreeing with my husband. Of course, he would agree even if William was wrong.

The Pope could proclaim those criminals saints and that would still not change my mind. Those mobsters were some of the worst men to walk this Earth. I had seen firsthand how they destroyed people, families.

John leaned over and pressed a kiss on my cheek. "We can talk about it all when the storm passes. I have to get to my place before it gets really bad."

With a sigh, I nodded and walked him to the front door. "Are you sure you don't want me to drive you over? Or stay here the night," I suggested.

"Yes, positive." He grabbed the umbrella and walked through the door, with me right behind him. "Try not to worry too much."

He gave me one more smooch on my cheek and turned around, leaving me behind as he stepped out into the rain while opening the umbrella. He walked out into the dark, rain trickling down over the umbrella's edges.

"Text us when you get home," I called out to him. He didn't turn around but just waved his hand in the air, acknowledging he would.

He lived only two streets over, but it would give us a peace of mind to know if he confirmed he got home safe. Standing on the wide front stone porch, covered only by a little overhang, I watched John's figure disappear through the rainy, dark night. The rain poured and the wind howled, a feeling of dread slowly creeping up my spine.

I didn't have a good feeling about what they had done tonight. People didn't just get away with taking a bag with hundreds of thousands of dollars like it was nothing.

From the corner of my eye, a light flickered over the water and my head whipped in its direction. Like a cigarette butt or a lighter. My eyes scanned the dark surface, the little drops of rain wetting my face. I saw something; I knew it wasn't my overactive imagination. I held my breath, the sense of being watched increasing with each second. It sent fear and a shudder down my spine, sensing the dangers that lurked in the dark. Something or somebody was out there.

It’s just your imagination, I tried to convince myself. Everything that happened tonight made me paranoid.

But I couldn’t get rid of the feeling of being watched, my skin tingling with awareness. Thunder shuddered the earth, the sound of the waves violent against the shore.

“Bianca?” My husband’s voice came from behind me.

I jumped in fear, snapping my head in his direction. He stood right behind me on the porch, his hair still wet.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” I scolded him softly. “I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

His immune system was weak. Compromised, more like it. The treatments have barely started, but it was taking a toll on him.

“We are not giving that money back,” he uttered, that stubbornness I came to know well edged on his young face.

“William, we have to.” My voice cracked. I was scared. Scared of losing my husband. Scared of the mafia and their ruthlessness. Scared of consequences. “You know as well as I do, that money has to be returned. It’s not ours. You working with them is a mistake. Bad news.”

He shook his head in disagreement, but he knew I was right. It was in his eyes, along with the exhaustion of the last few months.

You’d never know my husband was gravely sick, his system fighting a deadly cancer. Not unless you’ve known him for as long as I have. Not unless you lived with him. He hid it, but he tired faster, slept harder, and barely ate.

“We need the money for treatments,” he reasoned. I could see he was tired, the cancer was slowly eating at his strength and his youth. He aged at least ten years in the last few months. His head tilted to the bag that still stood next to the door, where I insisted it stayed until they returned it. “And for you, in case, if I-”

“Don’t say it,” I whispered, my heart squeezing in my chest. “Don’t you fucking dare say it.”

“Baby, you know what the doctors said.”

Yes, I fucking knew what they said, but I refused to believe there was no hope. There had to be something that we could do. Hope still lingered in me, that he’d pull through. We still had so much to work out. We needed another chance to make up for the time we’d allowed the distance to grow between us.

He has to pull through.

He came up to me, wrapped his arms around me. I buried my face into his chest, inhaling his scent while my throat constricted with sobs I kept in.

“Bianca, I want you to be taken care of,” he whispered into my hair, his voice tired. “I want to make sure you and the girls are okay when I’m gone.”

Sobs won the battle and I buried my head into his chest as tears streamed down my face. “Don’t talk like that,” I begged, my voice hoarse. “Please, William. You have to get better. We can find a doctor that has a cure,” I rasped shakily.

He wrapped me tightly into his arms, with the same strength he used to have, feeding my hope as he pressed his lips softly onto my forehead.

His kiss on my forehead was the first goodbye.

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